A Guide to Punctuation

Use italics…
For titles of long works like books, magazines, journals, albums, series, or movies
  •  *The Great Gatsby*, *Newsweek*, *The White Album*, *The Godfather*, *The Office*
For foreign words or phrases
  •  The beautiful cabinet was really the carpenter’s *magnum opus*.
To add emphasis to a word (use sparingly)
  •  Though I haven’t been to Disneyland, *I have* been to Disneyworld.
For a word you are defining or discussing
  •  *Grammar* is defined as “the whole system or structure of a language.”

Use apostrophes…
To show ownership (before an *s*, or after the *s* in a plural word)
  •  Brittany’s homework, Joe’s room, the college’s policy, my brothers’ wives, the team’s uniforms, the employees’ contracts, Jesus’s parables
In a contraction, to take the place of the missing letters
  •  can’t, don’t, I’m, they’ve, we’ll, won’t, it’s (it is)

Use quotation marks…
For titles of short works like short stories, articles, poems, episodes, or songs
  •  “*A Rose for Emily*,” “College Pressures,” “*Jabberwocky*,” “*Before He Cheats*”
For exact wording taken from a source
  •  The foreword to the *MLA Handbook* begins, “*The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* is designed to introduce you to the customs of a community of writers who greatly value scrupulous scholarship and the careful documentation, or recording, of research” (xv).
For a cliché or a loaded word you want to distance yourself from
  •  Unfortunately, I “can’t hit the broad side of a barn” with a rubber band.
  •  The main character of the movie was very “blonde.”

Use single quotation marks…
For a quote within a quote
  •  Karla said, “Your sister was reading ‘*The Tell-Tale Heart*’ at lunchtime.”
Use dashes…
To set off an interruption in the middle of a sentence, in place of parentheses or commas (dashes add more emphasis than parentheses do)
  • Soaring in a balloon—inventors first performed this feat in 1783—is a way to recapture the wonder that early aviators must have felt.
To introduce an explanation or a list at the end of a sentence, in place of a colon
  • I have lived in four states—California, Michigan, Texas, and Tennessee.

Note: to create a dash, type a hyphen twice, and your word processor should autoformat it.

Use hyphens…
For compound words, especially adjectives or names
  • Some activists will only buy products from free-range livestock.
  • My roommate studies early-thirteenth-century art.

Use an ellipsis…
To replace unneeded words in a quotation
  • In surveying various responses to plagues in the Middle Ages, Barbara W. Tuchman writes, “Medical thinking . . . stressed air as the communicator of disease, ignoring sanitation or visible carriers” (101-102).

Use square brackets…
To add words to a quotation for clarification
  • Milton’s Satan speaks of his “study [pursuit] of revenge.”
  • In the first act he soliloquizes, “Why she would hang on him [Hamlet’s father] / As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on....”
For parentheses within parentheses
  • The sect known as the Jansenists (after Cornelius Jansen [1585-1638]) faced opposition from both the king and the pope.