

The Comma

The comma has many applications. When addressing someone, use a comma. Depending upon usage, if you do not insert a comma in this scenario, your sentence will have a different meaning than the one you intended.

Example: “I don't know, Theo.” (You are telling Theo that you do not know.)

Not: “I don't know Theo.” (You are telling a third party that you are unacquainted with and have never physically met the individual Theo.)

INSIDE the quotation mark and the comma

The comma or punctuation goes inside the quotation marks.

Example: “It's a beautiful day, don't you think?”

Not: She said to me, “It's a beautiful day, don't you think”?

Contractions

Most people don't speak without using contractions. Be conscious of when someone speaks with a contraction and when they don't.

Try to make your dialogue sound how real human beings speak.

Example: “If you're so good, you do it.”

Not: “If you are so good, you do it.”

You can specifically not use a contraction as a choice if you are putting special emphasis on certain words.

Example: “You are the most beautiful girl I've ever met.”

This puts special thoughtfulness into the way the speaker would say “you are,” and because it is filled with emotion, may well be appropriate to that moment.

It's vs. Its

“It's” = It is. This is a contraction.

Example: “It's a good thing.”

Not: “Its a good thing.”

“Its” indicates possession.

Example: (re: carpet) “You can tell by its faded color that it's really, really old.”

Not: (re: carpet) “You can tell by it's faded color that its really, really old.”

There, Their, They're

This is also a very frequent mistake. But, it is a very simple rule.
“There” = location, placement, here/there or over there.

Example: “Look over there.”

Not: “Look over their.”

Example: “There's the gun.” (i.e. there is the gun)

Not: “Theirs the gun.”

“Their” = possession, they have.

Example: “Their eyes are blue.” (two or more individuals have blue eyes)

Not: “There eyes are blue.”

Example: “It's their problem, not mine.”

Not: “It's there problem, not mine.”

“They're” = contraction of “they are”.

Example: “They're up on the roof.”

Not: “Their up on the roof.”

Example: “They think they're doing well, but they're not.”

Not: “They think their doing well, but there not.”

Your vs. You're

“Your” indicates possession.

Example: “I really like your handbag. Is that an *Hermès*?”

Example: “I'm sorry to tell you, but your screenplay needs work.”

Not: “I'm sorry to tell you, but you're screenplay needs work.”

You're is a contraction of “you are”.

Example: “You're being ridiculous.”

Not: “Your being ridiculous.”

Apostrophe and Possessive

The apostrophe indicates possession. Do not use an apostrophe when you are just making something plural. You don't need it. If you add an apostrophe, it means somebody has it.

Example: Sarah's handbag

Example: Scott's toothbrush

Not: Sarah has many handbag's

No apostrophe in ages.

Example: LAKSHMI PIERRA, 40s,

Not: LAKSHMI Pierra, 40's,

The Dash (–)

The dash indicates someone being cut off or interrupted in dialogue. An abrupt stop to the line.

Example: “Don't think that if you–”

Example: “You get away from me. I'm going to cut off your–”

The Ellipses (...)

The ellipsis indicates a pause in dialogue, such as a thought trailing off. Unlike the dash, this is not an abrupt ending or interruption. This could be used when someone loses their train of thought.

Example (stylistically proper): “I don't know...”

The Parenthetical

A good use of parenthetical is if that character is speaking another language.

EXAMPLE

BOBBY

(in Russian)

I'm going to slit your throat and watch you bleed to death.

Try not use a parenthetical to state the obvious interpretation of the line.

SARAH

(smiling)

I'm going to slit your throat and watch you bleed to death.

NOT

SARAH

(angry)

I'm going to slit your throat and watch you bleed to death.

The CAPS

Caps are to be used when introducing a character. The first and last names only are in caps.

Example: XAVIER SMITH, 39, impresario extraordinaire.

NOT: IMPRESARIO EXTRAORDINAIRE XAVIER SMITH 39

NOT: IMPRESARIO extraordinaire Xavier Smith thirty nine.

Caps also can be used for loud noises (SCREAM) or to flag an important word within an action sequence (for example, the introduction of a GUN or a LEAP across a building).

The capping of selective words on the page helps the reader read down the page (dialogue and key words to understand the plot). If you cap too many words, the reader will not know where to focus the eye, and then won't get those outstanding details.

Exclamation (!)

Do not overuse!!! Most of the time, you don't need the exclamation. The sentiment will be abundantly clear from the line. If it's not, consider rewriting the line before adding an exclamation point.

Example: "You killed my mother."

Not: "You killed my mother!"

The first line might be interpreted by an actor with rich subtext, however the second comes off as something out of a melodrama.