Correct Use of Commas, Semi-colons, and Colons

Commas, semi-colons, and colons are a very useful type of punctuation but they are very easy to misuse. There are, however, a few rules that can help you use them correctly.

When to use commas:

1. **Use between two long independent clauses joined by words such as and, or, but, for, or nor.**
   
   *I have reviewed my notes, but she is still reading them.*
   
   a. If both clauses are very short, you may omit the comma.
   
   *I read and she wrote.*
   
   b. If you only have one clause, you usually don’t need a comma in front of the conjunction (and, or, but, etc.).
   
   *I have painted the house but still need to sand the floors.* (Note there is only one subject)
   
2. **Use a comma after a dependent clause that begins a sentence.**
   
   *When I wrote my paper, I hardly slept at all.*
   
3. **Use commas to separate items in a series.**

   *I saw an error in spelling, subject-verb agreement, and tense.*
   
4. **Use a comma after introductory adverbs.**

   *Unsurprisingly, I passed the class.*
   
5. **Use a comma when attributing a quote.**

   *The author said, “proofreading is important.”*
   
6. **Use a comma to separate the elements in a full date.**

   *I wrote it on March 3, 2018.*

When to use semi-colons:

1. A semicolon can be used to join two independent clauses that are closely related in thought.

   *The author noted the study results; an improvement in grades.*
   
2. **Use a semicolon to separate items in a series when one or more already include a comma.**

   *The meeting included students from Los Angeles, California; Alamo, Tennessee; and Mobile, Alabama.*
   
3. **Use a semicolon when joining two independent clauses with a connector (and, but, or, not, etc.) when one or more commas appear in the first clause.**

   *When I finish grading the paper, and I will soon, I will give you feedback; and you can hold me to that.*

When to use colons:

A colon bears a meaning similar to ‘here is what I mean.’ It is often used to introduce examples.

1. **Use a colon to introduce an item or series of items.**
You know how to improve your paper: proofread. There are three key tasks to reviewing your paper: proofread, check spelling, and review citations.

2. When providing a list of items one by one, with one on each line, they might follow a colon. 
   I need to review the following:
   • Thesis statement
   • Sentence structure
   • APA citations

3. A colon may be used instead of a semicolon when joining two independent clauses when the second sentence explains, illustrations, paraphrases, or expands on the first sentence.
   The student got what she deserved: she really earned that grade.

Common mistakes with commas, semi-colons, and colons:

- Capitalizing words after a comma, semi-colon, or colon.
- Using a comma when a semi-colon is needed.
- Using a semi-colon when a comma is needed.
- Using a semi-colon instead of a colon.
- Using a comma before an ‘and’ that joins a sentence and a dependent clause.
  - Incorrect: “The teacher stood up, and addressed the class.”
  - Correct: “The teacher stood up and addressed the class.”
- Using a comma to connect two independent clauses without using a coordinating conjunction.
  - Incorrect: “The teacher graded the paper, she placed it in the tray.”
  - Correct: “The teacher graded the paper and placed it in the tray.”
  - Correct: “The teacher graded the paper; she placed it in the tray.”
  - Correct: “The teacher graded the paper. She placed it in the tray.”
- Using a comma to separate essential information in the middle of a sentence. It is acceptable for information that is not essential.
  - Incorrect: “The teacher, who had the highest class average, received an acknowledgement.”
  - Correct: “The teacher who had the highest class average received an acknowledgement.”
  - Correct: “The teacher, who was late to class, was written up.”
- Using a comma between two correlated conjunctions (either/or, not only/but also).
  - Incorrect: “She not only reviewed the paper, but also recorded the grade.”
  - Correct: “She not only reviewed the paper but also recorded the grade.”
- Using a colon for a list when that list immediately follows a verb or preposition.
  - Incorrect: “I need, a pencil, paper, and a calculator.”
  - Correct: “I need a pencil, paper, and calculator.”