COMMAS & SEMI-COLONS

Read your sentences aloud and see where you would naturally pause or where you would draw a breath. If it’s a short pause, like that just was, then you probably need a comma.

If it’s longer (but not quite a full stop) you might need a semi-colon; remember that whatever follows a semi-colon must be able to stand on its own as a full sentence.

DASHES & HYPHENS

When you are setting off a clause--this one is a good example--use a dash (or two hyphens "--"). The parts of the sentence before and after the dashes should make sense even if the dashes and the words they bracket are removed.

You can also use a dash in the place of a colon if you want to emphasize more dramatically the words that follow.
Ex: The mantlepiece was lined with photographs of the people she loved--her mother, her grandmother, a favorite aunt.

Hyphens are used to join words together: father-in-law, light-hearted, two-thirds

ABBREVIATIONS

Make sure to identify the abbreviation before you use them, unless you are sure that the average reader would be able to identify the acronym.

SPLIT INFINITIVES

Infinitives are comprised of the word to followed by a verb. Try to avoid split infinitives: placing words between the to and the verb.

Example: "The key to infinitives is not to split them" NOT "The key to infinitives is to not split them"

VOICE

In an active sentence, the subject does the action.
Ex: The students passed their test.

In a passive sentence, the subject receives the action.
Ex: The test was passed by the students.

Avoid a passive voice because it often saps energy and power from your prose.
TIPS FOR USING PRONOUNS

Make sure all your referents are clear.
When you say "This theory" or "that point" or, simply, "it," is it clear which theory or point you're referring to? When you use "he" or "she" or "these critics," will your reader have to pause to figure out who all these people are?

Never use "that" when referring to a person.
Use who or whom when referring to people, NOT that. You are writing about people, not objects—it's insulting to call them "that."
Ex: The guest who presented to the class.
NOT: The guest that presented to the class.

There's more to say about this.
We often throw in a "this" when we're not entirely sure exactly what we want to draw our readers' attention to, especially when we're making a complex argument with many different elements. Sometimes vagueness in our language can be a symptom of muddled thinking. So ask yourself, what does this "this" refer to? What words would I replace it with?

Who is doing what to whom?
That's the question you need to ask yourself if you're uncertain which word to use. The one that does the action (the subject) is who. The one that gets something done to it (the object) is whom.