NOTES ON STYLE/paula cizmar

What few of you know about me is that, for years, I supported my writing career by working as a freelance copy editor, developmental editor, and (sometimes) ghostwriter for major publishing companies, including Random House, Simon & Schuster, Harcourt, and St. Martin's Press. I've worked on fiction and nonfiction, trade and textbooks. So I speak from firsthand experience when I say that each press has a specific style that is required for all books published by that house. "Style" in this case is the language usage, punctuation, and number system used in publication (rather than "style" in a design or fashion sense). Most houses use a variation on the Chicago Manual of Style, although some use MLA, AP, or APA. If you're writing for hire, use the style manual required by your publisher. If you're writing on spec—which is what most of you are doing, i.e., you're writing something on your own which will then be submitted for publication—pick one style and stick with it. The most important part of proper style can be summed up in two words: BE CONSISTENT. Here are a few basics:

Commas

For lists of items, use the *serial comma* (AKA *series comma*). Example:
> "…red, white, and blue." (Rather than "…red, white and blue.")

The serial comma is much more precise, and no one will ever mistake which words are items in a list and which words are part of another phrase. HOWEVER: If you do not wish to use the serial comma, then be consistent. Either *always* use it, or *never* use it. It is not correct to use it sometimes and not other times.

For long complicated lists, use semi-colons. Use commas to separate items within a larger item; use semi-colons to separate the groupings of items. Examples:

> The price of the product differed depending on the specific chemical makeup of the requested material; the amount of tempering and adjustment required in the manufacturing process; and the difficulty in shipping the various sizes to certain transfer facilities.

> The discussion would explore texture, finish, and material; specific style or genre; and color, hue, and tint.

Quotation marks with other punctuation

Quotation marks go outside commas and periods. However, quotation marks go inside semi-colons. Examples:

> "This day was too long," she said. "Even thinking about it makes me tired."

> Twain's formula was "1 percent inspiration, 99 percent perspiration," and he rarely waivered from this ratio.

> For Jen, this was just a matter of "sticks and stones."

> At first glance, he saw that many of those chosen were what Ackerman called the "usual suspects"; however, some of the selected ones were brand new.

That/Which
That is restrictive. *Which* is nonrestrictive. *That* immediately follows the word it is referring to and does not take a comma. If a word or phrase separates *that* from the word it refers to, use *which* without a comma. When *which* is used in a nonrestrictive sense, it requires a comma. Examples:

> The country that produces the most goat cheese is France.
> The country in North America which produces the least goat cheese is Canada.
> Countries producing goat cheese, which is quite delicious, often have trade agreements with the United States.

Dialogue
In dialogue, characters may speak using slang, or non-grammatical language, or fragments. Dialogue should mimic everyday speech.

When one character's dialogue continues from one paragraph to the next, do not use an end quotation mark at the end of the first paragraph, but do begin the new paragraph with a quotation mark.

To create dialogue that flows, use *said* or *says* most of the time. These words become invisible, thereby highlighting what the character is saying. Fancy constructions such as "he asserted" or "she interjected" tend to clutter up the dialogue and call more attention to themselves than what the character is saying.

Avoid using commas in place of periods. Examples of properly punctuated dialogue:

> "Stop it," she said. "I'm outta here. I warned you."
> "First you buy some flour," she says. "Then you can start the crust."
> "It's not likely," he said, "but it certainly is possible."

Numbers
There are a variety of rules, depending on the style manual used or the specific publisher. Some say spell out numbers one to ten and then use numerals after that. Some say spell out numbers after 100, except for units of measure. PICK ONE and be consistent.

My preferred number system is:
Spell out numbers up to 100. So it would be "ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall" or "there were six cows in the pasture."
Use numerals for units of measure. E.g., "the fence was 8 feet tall" or "she answered correctly 78 percent of the time" or "the canal was 18 miles away."
Spell out round numbers. E.g., a million, one thousand, ten thousand, two hundred.
IF a numeral is used in a paragraph (for example, "342 hats"), then use numerals for all the numbers in that paragraph, even if the numbers are below 100. (For example: "First Josh planned on making a minimum of 342 hats. This seemed like a good number until he saw that only 21 people would be attending. That meant he would have to convince each of them to wear more than 3 hats apiece.")