Writing Conventions: Citations and Punctuation

Are these academic conventions or my pet peeves? Is there a difference?

Basically, for citations, consistency is the main thing. These are not research papers, you don’t need a bibliography. The two most common sets of conventions for citing texts are the MLA (Modern Language Association) and Chicago Manual of Style. Many people are also moving towards a system more commonly used in social sciences than in the humanities (APA—American Psychological Association).

I follow the Chicago Manual of Style--it is easily accessible on the library's page under "Browse Databases," and it is surprisingly un-intimidating to navigate and understand.

Here are some things especially of which to be aware:

I've noticed in the last year or so students suddenly putting periods and commas outside of closing quotation marks. They go inside unless you’re a Brit. Question marks go outside if the question is yours, inside if the question is being quoted.

When you cite a quote, the citation is not part of the quote (e.g.: as Reimarus writes, "blah blah blah p. 67"), but it is part of your sentence. So you need to cite as follows: As Reimarus writes, "blah blah blah" (p. 67). And you need to manipulate the quote so that your sentence in which it is embedded is still a grammatically correct sentence. This means not just that the syntax has to work, but also standards of capitalization and punctuation. If the quote is the beginning of the sentence in the source material, but not the beginning of your sentence, you will need to fix the capitalization. But you need to indicate to your reader that you have altered it. This is done with brackets: A famous opening sentence is, "[c]all me Ishmael."

Clauses set off by dashes use dashes, not hyphens. That is done in word processing by using two hyphens--like this. Word will usually convert those into one dash, longer than the shorter hyphen. But if it doesn't that's OK, use the 2 hyphens.

Ellipses indicate text you omit when quoting. They are three periods--and they are separated by spaces (both from each other, and from the preceding and succeeding words . . . ). If you omit text and then end a sentence, you will need 4 dots--three ellipses and a period . . . .

Finally, your reader knows that when you quote you are not quoting the entire text. So you very very rarely need ellipses at the beginning or end of a quote (unless it will not be clear that you have not quoted something in its entirety, and that will be confusing). No need to write, " . . . And the word became flesh."

And notice the way periods and parentheses work. If an entire sentence is in parentheses, the period goes inside the closing paren. (Like this.) If the paren ends a sentence but is not the whole sentence, the period goes outside (like this).