

Colons and Semicolons¹

DePauw University Writing Center

COLONS

1. Use a colon to introduce lists of things: items in a series which can not be single words, phrases, or subordinate clauses.

Note: The first sequence before a colon must be an independent clause or complete sentence. For example, the following sentence is incorrect:

- a. My favorite animals are: lions, tigers, aardvarks, and hippopotamuses.

These two are correct:

- b. Joe-kitty sometimes catches small animals: birds, snakes, moles and mice.
 - c. It is the goodness of God that in our country we have those three unspeakable good things: freedom of speech, freedom of conscious, and the prudence to never practice either of them.
2. Use a colon to connect two independent clauses when the second enlarges on or explains the first.
 - a. The students had an inspired idea: they would publish an underground newspaper.
 - b. Only later did the truth come out: Clyde had gambled away his inheritance, embezzled the company funds, and skipped town with the loot.

If the second clause poses a question, begin with a capital letter.

- c. The main question is this: What are we going to do about the beer shortage?

3. Use a colon after the salutation of business letters.

- a. Dear Mr. Shuttlecock:

4. Use a colon between the title and subtitle of a book or article.

- a. American Humor: A Study in the Nation Character
- b. "The Money Motif: Economic Implications in Huckleberry Finn"

SEMICOLONS

1. The semicolon means to stop briefly; the go ahead. Complete sentences connected by semicolons should be closely related.

- a. Clarence has three kittens; one of them is uncommonly homely.
- b. When angry, count four; when very angry, swear.

¹ Adapted from CLU Writing Center and excerpted from The Writer's Rhetoric and Handbook, Elizabeth McMahan and Susan Day.

2. When sentences are joined with a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, for, nor, yet, so), use commas. However, you should be sure to use a semicolon with conjunctive adverbs:

Accordingly	Besides	Consequently	Furthermore	Hence
However	Indeed	Instead	Likewise	Meanwhile
Moreover	Nevertheless	Nonetheless	Otherwise	Then
Therefore	Thus	Too		

The type of connective you choose need not change the meaning, but it will change the punctuation. The following sentences, for instance, appear to require identical punctuation, but in standard usage the first requires a semicolon, the second only a comma.

- a. The demonstrators have a valid point; however, I can't condone their violence.
- b. The demonstrators have a valid point, but I can't condone their violence.

Note: The problem of whether to use a comma after the adverb need no longer trouble you: it's optional now. Use a comma only if you want to emphasize the adverb.

- a. The puppies are only three days old; however, you may pick one out without handling them.
- b. The puppies are only three days old; consequently you must not handle them.

3. The semicolon substitutes for the comma in separating items in series when any of the items listed already contains commas, as in this sentence:
- a. Moose-kitty tangled with an enormous, testy tomcat; triumphed momentarily; lowered his guard; then suffered a torn ear, a scratched eye, and mangled whiskers.

EXERCISES

1. He believed that spicy foods were good for the heart, therefore, he ate jalapeno peppers for breakfast each morning.
2. The planning commissioner said that in his judgment the new skyscraper had: "all the earmarks of an eyesore."
3. The robber asked for only two things; his money and his life.
4. He was tall, handsome, and rich, everyone loved him.
5. He forgot to add oil, thus he found himself the victim of thrown rods and other incomprehensible malfunctions.
6. Special sunglasses have now been devised for skiers, some of whom suffer acutely from glare; for people who want to wear only one pair of glasses in sun and shade; and for others who, for whatever reason, don't want their fellow citizens to catch sight of their eyes.