

Semicolons and Colons

“Sophisticated Grammar”

Semicolons and colons intimidate many people because writers do not understand how these punctuation marks operate within the text. As opposed to the comma, the semicolon principally separates related sentences. Thus, the semicolon separates groups of words that could be complete sentences by themselves. Colons may also separate independent clauses; however, they primarily begin lists. Semicolons and colons indicate sophisticated writing. Remember that using too many semicolons and colons can make a paper look cluttered, particularly a shorter paper. Use them sparingly in order to add variety to the methods utilized to connect sentences.

Semicolons

I have grown fond of semicolons in recent years. The semicolon tells you that there is still some question about the preceding full sentence. –Lewis Thomas



4 Ways to Play

1 Semicolons can replace the period between two closely related independent clauses.

Ex: The Clash helped create the punk music genre; modern day bands such as Rancid have a sound that is similar to The Clash.

2 Semicolons should be used before transitional expressions and conjunctive adverbs in order to avoid comma splices.

Ex: Herman Melville was an incredible author; however, many readers no longer appreciate the intricacies of his works.



Transitional expressions include: furthermore, moreover, nevertheless, therefore, however, hence, etc.

3 Semicolons are occasionally employed in coordinating conjunctions when a comma has already been used in order to reduce confusion in reading.

Ex: Long distance relationships, such as those stretching between two states, rarely work out; but if the two individuals focus on the communication in the relationship, it can work.

4 Semicolons separate items in a long list when commas have already been used. Punctuating this way groups items into a paralleled pattern so that the reader can see where one item ends and another one begins.

Ex: The new husband cooked two side dishes, a large entrée, and desert; ironed three shirts, two pairs of pants, and a suit jacket; and changed the sheets on the bed only to hear that his wife would be late from work that night.



Tip: Do not use semicolons after an incomplete sentence: Writers will create a sentence fragment by doing so. Instead, insert a comma between the introductory statement and the rest of the sentence.

Incorrect: In the morning; light streamed in through my bedroom window and woke me.

Correct: In the morning, light streamed in through my bedroom window and woke me.

“Royal Writing”



Colons

When we are very young, we tend to regard the ability to use a colon much as a budding pianist regards the ability to play with crossed hands: many of us, when we are older, regard it as a proof of literary skill, maturity, and even of sophistication. –Eric Partridge



3 Ways to Play

1 Colons are used to mark the beginning of a list. Remember, the sentence before the colon must be complete.

Ex: To be a good teacher, you must exhibit three characteristics in the classroom: passion, knowledge, and relevance of material.



Tip: Do not use a colon if you use common lead in words: “consists of,” “including,” “like,” and “such as.” If you use one of those lead-in’s, than you will not have a complete sentence before the colon. However, words such as “as follows” or “the following” require a colon.

2 Colons may also introduce quotes. The introductory expression before the quote must be a complete sentence in order to include the colon. Writers will also want to use the colon when more than one sentence exists within the quoted material or if they are setting off a block quotation.

Ex: I think I found a new motto the other day: “The man who hasn’t read good books has no advantage over the man who can’t read them.” –Mark Twain

3 Colons may sometimes be used between two separate sentences. The second sentence should explain or illustrate the first sentence. Writers should not use a coordinating conjunction when they use a colon to separate two separate sentences. Capitalize both sentences.

Ex: She remembered owning her first cellular phone: She dropped it three times and broke the screen within four hours of purchasing it.

Other Common Colon Uses

Proportions:

The ratio (sugar:tea) was 1:9.

Title and Subtitle:

“Religion in Reverse: The Role of Baptism in Moby Dick.”

Bible Passages:

Last night I read John 3:16.

Salutation in a Business Letter:

Dear Dr. John Basta:

Alternate Postscript:

PS: Remember to make an appointment with the Writing Center!

Time:

Ryan arrived at 5:15 p.m. last Friday.