

#45 Semicolons and Colons

Semicolons

Semicolons have but three uses. Once you have mastered the three proper uses, you will know how to recognize if you have placed a semicolon in your text incorrectly.

- 1) Use the semicolon to join two independent clauses* with related ideas. The period indicates a full stop, an end to the idea expressed. The semicolon, however, signals to the reader that another related, qualifying, or subtly connected idea is coming. Most writers use this strategy for connecting independent clauses sparingly.
(*For review of independent clauses, see QWC handout #21 Independent Clause Errors)

Example: Judaism is thus no transcendental religion; it is concerned with life as we live it and can up to a point grasp it, and nothing else. –Albert Einstein, *The World as I See It*

- 2) Use the semicolon and a conjunctive adverb to join two independent clauses. A conjunctive adverb is sometimes called a “transitional expression” because it signals to the reader a relationship between the ideas expressed in the independent clauses. For example, the conjunctive adverb “consequently” signals a result or effect. The conjunctive adverb “however” signals a contrast. A conjunctive adverb used to join independent clauses is preceded by a semicolon and followed by a comma.

Example: Our children enjoyed the life-like statues at the Lincoln and Albert Einstein Memorials in Washington, D.C.; however, the symbolism at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial made no impression on them.

Be careful: Sometimes a conjunctive adverb like “however” can appear mid-sentence, as opposed to in the linking position between the two independent clauses. When this happens, the adverb is preceded and followed by a comma.

Example: Our children enjoyed the life-like statues at the Lincoln and Albert Einstein Memorials in Washington, D.C. The symbolism of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, however, made no impression on them.

- 3) Use the semicolon to separate items in a series or list when the items contain internal punctuation. Normally, commas separate items in a series, but sometimes one or more of the items contains a comma, and that can cause confusion. Switching to the semicolon as the marker separating the items in a series makes the sentence clearer for the reader.

Example: The other tourists on our shuttle from the D.C. airport were from Springfield, MA; Dayton, OH; Atlanta, GA; Lexington, KY; Springfield, MO; and Littleton, CO.

Example: On Thursday, we went to the Smithsonian with three professors we met at the Marriot lunch buffet: Dr. Wilson, a biologist from Cornell; Dr. Roth, an anthropologist from UCLA; and Dr. Pilar, a chemist from Utah State.

Colons

Colons have a wider variety of uses than semicolons. To begin, colons may be used following an independent clause to introduce a list, an explanation, an appositive, or a quotation. Colons may also be used as punctuation between two independent clauses.

- 1) Use the colon to introduce a list. When a colon introduces a list, the words before the list must form an independent clause.

Example: In Chapter 8, Book 4, of *The Social Contract*, [Rousseau] outlines the simple dogmas of civil religion: the existence of God, the life to come, the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice, and the exclusion of religious intolerance. –Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America”

- 2) Use the colon to provide an explanation. Again, begin with an independent clause, punctuate with a colon, and then provide the reader with information that explains what you have stated in the independent clause. In the following example, the language that follows the colon, which is also a list, explains what one finds in Wichita that makes it so middle-American in the opinion of the author.

Example: If you are like me, a fan of American middleness, Wichita is your kind of place: an El Dorado of hamburger stands, alliterative city slogans, pork tenderloin sandwiches, souped-up trucks, old-school diners, bowling alleys, and steakhouses with Spandex-clad waitresses. –Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*

- 3) Use the colon to introduce an appositive. An appositive is a word or words that rename a noun or pronoun. Again, the construction preceding the colon must be an independent clause.

Example: Following Smithsonian visit, we all agreed that the best exhibit was the Spark!Lab: an interactive space where kids can do science experiments and read inventors’ notebooks.

- 4) Use the colon to introduce a quotation. The colon may be used in place of the more typically used comma. The introduction to the quotation must be an independent clause.

Example: In his Grant Park acceptance speech, President-elect Obama thanked his supporters and made them an implicit promise: “But above all, I will never forget who this victory truly belongs to—it belongs to you.”

- 5) Use the colon to link two independent clauses. Like the semicolon, the colon can be used to join two independent clauses. Whereas the semicolon usually is used to link a first independent clause with a related, qualifying, or subtly connected idea, the colon may be used to connect a first independent clause that contains general remark to a second one that is more specific, or, in the case of the following example, a first independent clause that makes an assertion and a second one that provides evidence to support it.

Example: But there was virtually no change in the voters’ ideological self-identification: in 2008, 22 percent called themselves liberal, up only marginally from 21 percent in 2004; 34 percent were conservative, unchanged from the last election; and 44 percent called themselves moderate, compared with 45 percent in 2004. –William Kristol, *New York Times*

Note: When you begin the second independent clause following the colon, capitalization is generally considered optional. Some authors capitalize the first word of the second independent clause. The author of the example above did not capitalize the first word of the new clause (“in”). Check the style manual in your field when preparing documents for publication and formal course submission to ensure you also have this option.

Colons are also used for a variety of punctuation occasions. The following list should help you properly use colons in these other miscellaneous situations.

- 1) **Title and Subtitle**

Old Age: Its Cause and Prevention

- 2) **Salutations in Formal Letters**

Dear Mrs. Collins:

- 3) **Hours, Minutes, and Seconds**

Our flight for Washington departed at 10:49 a.m.

The Kenyan track star ran the mile in 3:47:08.

- 4) **Cities and Publishers in Bibliographic Entries**

Boston: Bedford, 2008

- 5) **Biblical Chapters and Verses**

John puzzled for some days over Ecclesiastes 6:12, which reads, "For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? For who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?"

- 6) **Ratios**

The ratio of width to height of typical computer displays is 4:3.

Colon Miscues

The colon is most typically misused when a writer places one in a sentence between a verb and its object or complement. Problems also arise for some writers when using the words “such as” or “including” to introduce a series or a list. In order to ensure you have used the colon correctly, check to see if the language preceding the colon is an independent clause. If the language is not an independent clause, you can omit the colon. Such situations do not require the colon or any other punctuation mark.

Incorrect: Spark!Lab offers: science experiments, inventors’ notebooks, and interactive games.

Correct: Spark!Lab offers science experiments, inventors’ notebooks, and interactive games.

Incorrect: The Smithsonian has many wonderful exhibits, such as: Spark!Lab, Triceratops, and The Peacock Room.

Correct: The Smithsonian has many wonderful exhibits, such as Spark!Lab, Triceratops, and The Peacock Room.

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