

Colons

Colons are introducers. They are used to introduce lists, introduce quotes, introduce examples, and introduce sub-titles. That's what colons do. Furthermore, with the exception of sub-titles, colons are only used after an independent clause (i.e., after what could stand alone as a complete sentence).

Introduce Lists

Consider the following examples:

- *You will need a hammer, some nails, and some bandages.*
- *You will need these supplies: a hammer, some nails, and some bandages.*

In the first example, the lead-in to the list ("You will need") is not an independent clause, so you don't use a colon. In the second example, the lead-in to the list ("You will need these supplies") is an independent clause, so you use the colon.

Introduce Quotes

Quotes work in the same manner:

- *She said, "We've got to cut expenses."*
- *She got right to the point: "We've got to cut expenses."*

Again, notice the lead-ins. The first ("She said") is not an independent clause. The second ("She got right to the point") is an independent clause. Again, you use the colon only after an independent clause; otherwise, the comma is your best choice.

Introduce Examples

You can also introduce an example with a colon, so long as the lead-in text is an independent clause.

You should always eat plenty of grains: for example, cereal, and bread.

The lead-in ("You should always eat plenty of grains") is an independent clause; therefore, you use a colon to lead into the example.

Introduce Sub-Titles

You may also use a colon to distinguish a main title from a sub-title. For example, the following is the main title of the book some Western instructors and students use in Written Communication classes.

Strategies for Successful Writing

It also has a subtitle.

A Rhetoric, Research Guide, Reader, and Handbook

To write this out as a single, complete title, you have

Strategies for Successful Writing: A Rhetoric, Research Guide, Reader, and Handbook

Semicolons

Semicolons are, perhaps, the most misunderstood creatures in the punctuation kingdom. They are often misused and even more often avoided, because people just don't know what to do with them. The truth is, it's not that hard. There are really only two significant uses of the semicolon: as a substitute for a period and as a substitute for a comma. So, you're probably wondering, why would you ever need a substitute period or a substitute comma? Read on and you'll find out.

A Substitute Period

You can use a semicolon in exactly the same way you would use a period by placing it at the end of a sentence. It serves the same purpose (separating one sentence from another), but it also tells the reader that there is a strong relationship between the sentences on either side of the semicolon. The following is an example of an appropriate use of a semicolon:

The ambulance siren was growing louder; we prayed they would arrive soon.

You could legitimately use a period after the word "louder" in the above passage. The semicolon simply tells the reader that there is a strong relationship between the sentences on either side.

Note: When you end a sentence with a semicolon, you do not begin the following sentence with a capital letter (unless it is a proper noun).

If you've ever been accused of using comma splices, the semicolon may be just the thing you were looking for. A comma splice occurs when you try to connect two sentences together using a comma (normally the job of a period). The reason people tend to use comma splices is that the two sentences they are connecting are so closely related, they seem like a single complete thought; that's the perfect time to use a semicolon.

A Substitute Comma

This is pretty rare, but it does happen. Suppose you had a sentence like the following:

To make this desert, you'll need four cups of flour one cup of milk three tablespoons of butter and one teaspoon each of nutmeg cinnamon and salt.

As you may know, when you have a list of three or more items in a sentence, you separate the elements in the list with commas. What makes the above sentence tricky is that you have two levels of lists. At one level you have a list based on measurement:

- Four cups of flour
- One cup of milk
- Three tablespoons of butter
- One teaspoon each of nutmeg, cinnamon, and salt

Notice that last item; it too has a list within it (a list within a list). That is where the semicolon comes in to help. Use semicolons to separate the items in the first list and commas to separate items in the list within a list. What you get is the following:

To make this desert, you'll need four cups of flour; one cup of milk; three tablespoons of butter; and one teaspoon each of nutmeg, cinnamon, and salt.

Links to Additional Information

- ["Using Colons and Semicolons"](#) from the University of Victoria English Language Centre