

Colons

Showing Sentence Divisions

The Colon

...is used to mark a major division in sentences.

Uses:

- Introducing a list, an appositive, a quotation, a summation, or an idea that somehow completes the introductory idea.(The colon can be in the above ways, however, only after an independent clause.)
- In the salutation in a formal letter, to indicate hours and minutes, to show proportions, between a title and subtitle, to separate city and publisher in bibliographic entries, and between chapter and verse in biblical references.
- In order to separate two independent clauses: the first of which explains the second.

Examples

- (List) The routine includes the following: twenty knee bends, fifty leg lifts, and five minutes of running in place.
- (Appositive) My roommate is guilty of two of the seven deadly sins: gluttony and sloth.
- (Quotation) Consider the words of J. F. Kennedy: “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”
- (Salutation of business letter) Dear Sir or madam:

Examples

- (Title and Subtitle) *Alvin Ailey: A Life in Dance*
- (Time) 5:30 p.m.
- (Bible verses) Luke 2:14
- (Proportions) The ratio of men to women was 2:1.
- (Bibliography) Boston: Bedford, 2004
- (Explanation) Their lobbying efforts were ultimately useless: the bill was soundly defeated.

When Not to Use a Colon

A colon should not be placed between a verb and its object or subject complement.

- ❑ **Wrong:** Her neighbor lent her: a pup-tent, a wooden canoe, and a slightly battered Coleman stove. (*colon between verb and objects*)
- ❑ **Right:** Her neighbor lent her a pup-tent, a wooden canoe, and a slightly battered Coleman stove.
- ❑ **Wrong:** His three goals are: to improve his public speaking skills, to increase his self-confidence, and to sharpen his sales techniques. (*colon between verb and subject complement*)
- ❑ **Right:** His three goals are to improve his public speaking skills, to increase his self-confidence and to sharpen his sales techniques.

When Not to Use a Colon

A colon should not be placed between a preposition and its object[s].

- **Wrong:** We traveled to: London, Wales, and Scotland.
- **Right:** We traveled to London, Wales, and Scotland.

When Not to Use a Colon

A colon should not be placed after “such as,” “including,” or “for example.”

- ❑ **Wrong:** The trees on campus include fine Japanese specimens such as: black pines, ginkgos, and cut-leaf maples.
- ❑ **Right:** The trees on campus include fine Japanese specimens such as black pines, ginkgos, and cut-leaf maples.