

Colons and Semicolons

A colon is used after an independent clause to call attention to the words that follow it, such as when introducing a list, series, or idea that explains or restates the introductory idea. Semicolons are used to separate two complete (and closely related) sentences. The semicolon is used instead of a period when the ideas in the two independent clauses are so closely related that a period would make too distinct a break between them. Semicolons are also used to separate lengthy items in a series list where commas are already in use within the item. There's a bit of irony that this punctuation mark is formed by combining the period with a comma to form the mark, because it literally ranks between the pause of the comma and the full stop of the period.

Uses of Colons

1. After an independent clause, a colon can be used to direct the reader's attention to a list, an appositive, or a quotation.
2. Colons are placed after the salutation of a business letter, between a title and subtitle, between divisions of time, Bible verses, and ratios/proportions.
3. Colons are used to separate two independent clauses: the second of which explains, restates, or summarizes the first.

Examples

1. (List) The workout regimen includes the following: thirty squats, sixty leg lifts, and four minutes of running in place.

Kendra visited three cities during her visit to the Maritimes: Halifax, Saint John, and Moncton.

2. (Appositive) My roommate is guilty of two of the seven deadly sins: gluttony and sloth.

My parents gave me an excellent piece of advice: avoid wasting time and energy worrying about things I cannot change.

The professor revealed the secret of her success: perseverance.

3. (Quotation) Consider the words of Martin Luther King: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

4. (Salutation of business letter) Dear Sir: . . .

5. (Title and subtitle) *Betty White: A Life Lived in Optimism*

6. (Time) 6:45 p.m.

7. (Bible verses) Jeremiah 29:11

8. (Proportions) The ratio of adults to children was 2:1.

9. (Explanation) Their campaigning efforts were ultimately useless: the candidate was soundly defeated.

10. (Between two independent clauses when the second explains, restates, or summarizes the first) Love is like salvation: it cannot be forced.

Misuses of Colons

1. Do not place a colon between a verb and its object or complement.
2. Colons are not used between a preposition and its object.
3. Do not use colons after “such as,” “including,” or “for example.”

Examples

Incorrect

The neighbors lent them: a six-person tent, an inflatable kayak, and a two-burner camping stove. (colon between verb and objects)

Correct

The neighbors lent them a six-person tent, an inflatable kayak, and a two-burner camping stove.

Incorrect

Her top goals are: to improve her public speaking skills, to increase her self-confidence, and to sharpen her public relations skills. (colon between verb and subject complement)

Correct

Her top goals are to improve her public speaking skills, to increase her self-confidence, and to sharpen her public relations skills.

Incorrect

The band traveled to: Paris, Rome, and Vienna. (colon between preposition and objects)

Correct

The band traveled to Paris, Rome, and Vienna.

Incorrect

The trees on campus include fine Japanese specimens such as: black pines, ginkgoes, and cut-leaf maples. (colon after “such as”)

Correct

The trees on campus include fine Japanese specimens, such as black pines, ginkgoes, and cut-leaf maples.

Semicolons

1. The semicolon is used to indicate a division in a sentence when a more distinct separation is needed between independent clauses than is indicated by a comma (e.g., between the two clauses of a compound sentence).

Example: The movie was hilarious; we laughed until we turned red.

2. Semicolons are used to link independent clauses not joined by coordinating conjunctions. Semicolons should join only those independent clauses that are closely related in meaning. Often the second independent clause will begin with what is called a conjunctive adverb (however, moreover, additionally, therefore, thus, consequently, otherwise, etc.).

Examples: Aerobic exercises help prevent back pain; proper posture is also important.

The consultant made six recommendations; however, only one has been adopted so far.

3. Semicolons are also used to separate lengthy items in a series list where commas are already in use within the item.

Example: Several locations of Waffle House can be found in in Atlanta, Georgia; Columbia, South Carolina; Jacksonville, Florida; and Mobile, Alabama.

Misuses of Semicolons

1. Do not use a semicolon to link a dependent clause or a phrase to an independent clause.

Examples:

Incorrect

Although maintaining a high level of physical fitness requires discipline; the effort pays off in improved cardiovascular health.

Correct

Although maintaining a high level of physical fitness requires discipline, the effort pays off in improved cardiovascular health.

2. Generally, a semicolon should not be placed before a coordinating conjunction that links two independent clauses in a compound sentence. The only exception to this guideline is if the two independent clauses are lengthy and already contain a number of commas.

Example:

Incorrect

The leading economic indicators have been declining for four consecutive quarters now; but some signs of a market rebound are beginning to trend in the new quarter.

Correct

The leading economic indicators have been declining for four consecutive quarters now, but some signs of a market rebound are beginning to trend in the new quarter.

Practice

Insert semicolons, colons, or commas as required.

1. Many reasons exist for poor written communication lack of planning, poor grammar, misuse of punctuation marks, and insufficient vocabulary.
2. The crime scene investigators collected an odd assortment of evidence bird feathers, gold coins, two soda cans, rope, and nail clippers.
3. Tension rose rapidly during yesterday’s meeting nevertheless, most of the council members remained calm.
4. Her chorus teacher had an eclectic taste in music salsa, classical, country, rock, pop, and blues.
5. The text message caught Alan by surprise fans who remain on the field will be arrested.
6. The driver knew what he had to do when he saw the paramedics remain calm.
7. JFK said “Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.”
8. When buying a laptop, consider these three factors cost, processor speed and internal memory.
9. Take with you only the most essential items leave behind all bulky and heavy items.
10. These seat covers are the most durable kind they are reinforced with double stitching and covered with a heavy plastic coating.
11. Ordered inventory includes the following coats scarves and boots.
12. Two things annoy the substitute teacher the most talking during class and not listening to instructions.
13. Kevin always studies before taking a math test actually Mabel also reviews the study guide to make sure she’s prepared.
14. When the lost purse was returned to them they decided to reward the person who found it.
15. All written assignments must be grammatically correct for example subjects must agree with their verbs in number.
16. The car trunk was large enough for everything rackets, golf clubs, fishing supplies, suitcases, coolers, and life preservers.

Answers: 1) communication; 2) evidence; 3) meeting; 4) music; 5) surprise; 6) paramedics; 7) said, 8) factors; 9) items; 10) kind: **or** kind; 11) following: coats, scarves, 12) most: 13) test; actually, 14) them, 15) correct; for example, 16) everything:

***The statement followed by an explanation illustrates when the punctuation marks can be used interchangeably, as rule #3 under “Uses of Colons” and #2 under “Semicolons” both apply.**

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