



School of Liberal Arts

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## *Using Semicolons and Colons*

*Semi-colons and colons are important marks of punctuation in writing that fulfill important grammatical and stylistic functions. As John Lannon, an author of a text on technical writing, says, "A semicolon usually works like a blinking red traffic light at an intersection by signaling a brief but definite stop." This is in contrast to the red light that stops traffic until the light changes; that's like a period. The colon also indicates a pause, one that is stronger than a semi-colon, but not as strong as the period. Generally, it is used to signal the beginning of important follow-up material. Lannon says this about the colon: "Like a flare in the road, a colon signals you to stop and then proceed, paying attention to the situation ahead, the details of which will be revealed as you move along." Remember, semi-colons and colons serve different functions in sentences; they should not be thought of as interchangeable marks of punctuation.*

### **SEMICOLON**

When you write a sentence with two independent clauses that you choose not to join with a coordinating conjunction (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*) and comma, the semicolon is the mark for you. With either the coordinating conjunction and comma or the semicolon, you avoid the error called "comma splice."

#### Examples:

The project was finally completed, we had done a good week's work. (comma splice—considered bad!)

We had done a good week's work, and the project was finally completed. (comma & *and*—correct)

The project was finally completed; we had done a good week's work. (semicolon by itself—correct)

Jane did not like her sociology class; in fact, she decided to drop it after just one week. (semicolon with *in fact*—correct)

The job is filled; however, we will keep your résumé on file. (semicolon with *however*—correct)

Notice in the last example that the semicolon can be used all by itself or together with an expression, technically called a conjunctive adverb, which connects the meanings of the two clauses. Notice that it would be possible to move the conjunctive adverb to another position in the second clause: *The job is filled; we will, however, keep your résumé on file.*

One unusual usage is when punctuating a complex list with items that have commas in them. In this case, the usual commas separating the items of the list are "promoted" to semicolons to distinguish them from the internal commas.

#### Example:

The winners are Carey Walsh, Waterbury, Connecticut; Seth Rothstein, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Joseph Abbott, Fort Worth, Texas. (correct)

### **WHEN NOT TO USE A SEMICOLON**

Except in the usage demonstrated immediately above, the semicolon is not used when there is only one independent clause in a sentence. A semicolon does not connect participial phrases or dependent clauses to the only independent clause in the sentence.

(see examples on the next page)

## **WHEN NOT TO USE A SEMICOLON (cont.)**

### Examples:

Whenever Richard Cory went downtown; we people on the sidewalk looked at him. (incorrect—the first clause is dependent)

Whenever Richard Cory went downtown, we people on the sidewalk looked at him. (correct)

I jostled my way through the stubborn crowd to the bandstand; carrying the cumbersome bass drum in front of me. (incorrect: what follows *bandstand* is a participial phrase)

I jostled my way through the stubborn crowd to the bandstand, carrying the cumbersome bass drum in front of me. (correct)

## **COLON**

When you introduce a list, a quotation, or some other element with a complete sentence, you can use a colon. The material that follows the colon explains or specifies what has been said in the earlier part of the sentence.

### Examples:

She is an ideal colleague: honest, reliable, and competent. (colon introduces qualities that explain why she is ideal)

The writing process consists of three phases: planning, drafting, and revision. (colon introduces a list)

His reason for accepting the lowest-paying job offer was simple: he had always wanted to live in the Northwest. (colon introduces a sentence that explains the simple reason)

The supervisor's message was clear enough: "You're fired." (colon introduces a quotation)

Other uses of the colon are in certain specific uses like the following:

- < Salutations in formal business letters  
Dear Dr. Chapman:
- < Hours, minutes, and seconds  
4:59  
2:15:06
- < Ratios  
a ratio of 5:1
- < Biblical chapters and verses  
I Corinthians 3:3-5
- < Titles and subtitles  
*American Dreams: Readings for Writers*
- < Cities and publishers in bibliographic entries  
Boston: Bedford, 2001

## **WHEN NOT TO USE A COLON**

Do not use a colon to separate a verb from its direct object or subject complement.

### Examples:

Sally went to the store and bought: sugar, flour, milk, and eggs. (incorrect)

Sally went to the store and bought sugar, flour, milk, and eggs. (correct)

Do not use a colon to separate a preposition from its object(s).

### Examples:

We went to: Lisbon, Paris, and Brussels. (incorrect)

We went to Lisbon, Paris, and Brussels. (correct)

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