Colons & Semicolons

**COLONS (:)**

Colons can be used to introduce a list, an appositive, or a formal quotation. Colons are always used after an independent clause.

**Lists:** The colon comes after an independent clause and before the items listed.

*I love anything with chocolate: cake, ice cream, milk, and peanut butter.*
*I have four classes on Mondays: Biology, Chemistry, English, and Art.*

Note: Not all lists need colons. For instance, a writer should not use a colon before a list if the part before it cannot be a complete sentence.

*I bought: bagels, milk, and cereal. = NOT CORRECT*
("I bought" cannot be a complete sentence.)

*I bought bagels, milk, and cereal. = CORRECT*
(Since the items in the list are essential to complete the sentence, do not use a colon. Commas are appropriate in this list.)

*I bought breakfast foods: bagels, milk, and cereal. = CORRECT*
(The items after the colon are not essential to finish the sentence, but they do describe what breakfast foods were bought. "I bought breakfast foods" is a complete sentence and can stand on its own.)

**Appositives:** Notice in the following examples how the clause before the colon is a full sentence.

*My goal is simple: win the lottery.*
*Only one person is not invited to the party: my crazy brother, Fred.*

**Quotes:** Colons can be used to introduce formal (and often, lengthy) quotations.

*This is how Martin Luther King, Jr. inspired his listeners at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963: "And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream...It is a dream deeply rooted in the American Dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."[...] I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!*
SEMICOLONS (;)
Semicolons can be used as a tool of separation or connection. In lists, they avoid confusion by separating items in that list that already have commas. Within paragraphs, a semicolon can show a connection between two sentences that wouldn’t, perhaps, be seen if a period was used.

Lists: If items in a list have commas within, semicolons are used to separate the bigger items to avoid confusion.

*My best friends are Sarah, the consultant, Tom, the construction worker, Lilly, the high school teacher, and Mike, the writer.* = NOT CORRECT
(It is confusing whether Sarah or Tom is the consultant, etc.)

*My best friends are Sarah, the consultant; Tom, the construction worker; Lilly, the high school teacher; and Mike, the writer.* = CORRECT
(To show that "the consultant" is describing Sarah and "the construction worker" is describing Tom, we can use semicolons to separate the bigger items in the list.)

Sentences: Semicolons can show a connection between closely related sentences. A period could be used instead of a semicolon, but the direct connection could be lost.

*People often misjudged this restaurant; behind its boring facade lay a playground for flavors, colors, and textures galore.*

Notice that the semicolon connects two complete sentences (independent clauses).

*When the general walked in; everyone stood up.* = NOT CORRECT
(The beginning phrase, “When the general walked in,” cannot be its own sentence.)

*When the general walked in, everyone stood up; he was a man who commanded respect.* = CORRECT
(The semicolon comes between two independent clauses that can stand alone.)