



# WRITING CENTER

## Semicolons and Colons

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### SEMICOLONS

A semicolon (;) is used in four ways:

- Between two independent clauses that are not connected by a coordinating conjunction.
- In a series between items that have internal punctuation.
- To avoid confusion when commas are used between elements in a series.
- Before a transitional connective between two main clauses.

### DO THIS WHEN USING A SEMICOLON

1. Use semicolons to **separate independent clauses**.

**Examples:** I invited Sara and John to the party; Joe and Charles also came.  
Take care of the children; the adults can take care of themselves.

2. Use semicolons in a **series between items that have internal punctuation**

**Example:** Among those present were Dr. Holmes, pastor of the First Methodist Church; A. C. Levitt, superintendent of schools; B. L. Rainey, manager of the Benson Hotel; and M. T. Cord, vice president of Miller and Sons.

3. Use semicolons to **avoid confusion when commas are used between elements in a series**.

**Example:** His tour included concert appearances in Austin, Texas; Little Rock, Arkansas; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Kansas City, Kansas.

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4. Use semicolons **before a transitional connective between two main clauses.**

### Transitional connectives

also	furthermore	likewise	in addition	then
besides	hence	moreover	since	therefore
consequently	however	nevertheless	so	yet

**Examples:** It won't work; **therefore**, there is no sense in buying it.  
His eyes went bad; **consequently**, he had to resign as a proofreader.

### DO NOT DO THIS WHEN USING THE SEMICOLON

- 1. Do not use semicolons as the equivalent of colons.** Semicolons and colons are not interchangeable. The colon is used to indicate that something is to follow, usually a series of items. The semicolon is never used between an independent and a subordinate clause.

**Example:** *Incorrect:* My records show that the following students have not finished; Andrews, Smith, and Wallace.

*Correct:* My records show that the following students have not finished: Andrews, Smith, and Wallace.

- 2. Do not use semicolons as the equivalent of commas.** A comma is used within a sentence; a semicolon is stronger and is used between independent statements. When more emphatic punctuation is desired, a semicolon may be substituted for a comma between main clauses that are joined by a conjunction.

**Example:** My old job paid more; the new one has a brighter future

However, a semicolon cannot be substituted for a comma between a main clause and a subordinate clause.

**Example:** *Incorrect:* Although I seldom have trouble with grammar or spelling; I never seem to use the right punctuation.

*Correct:* Although I seldom have trouble with grammar or spelling, I never seem to use the right punctuation.

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- 3. Avoid indiscriminate substitution of semicolons for periods.** The semicolon and the period have different functions, and should not be used interchangeably. If a writer wishes to relate two sentences more closely than a period would permit, a semicolon may be better.

### COLONS

A colon (:) is used in four ways:

- To introduce a series or a list that follows a complete clause.
- To separate complete clauses.
- To link a complete clause with a quotation.
- To link a main clause with an appositive.

### DO THIS WHEN USING A COLON

1. Use a colon to **introduce a series or a list that follows a complete clause**. The statements on either side of the colon do not have to have the same grammatical structure, but a colon should follow a complete sentence that can stand on its own.
- Example:** Writing a college level paper requires several steps: outline, first draft, revise, second draft, revise, and submit.

2. Use a colon to **separate complete clauses** when the second clause further explains or re-states the first clause.

**Example:** We won't make it to the store in time: they close in 5 minutes.

**Tip:** To test if you have used a colon properly, substitute the phrase **that is**. Usually, if **that is** makes sense, the colon has been used correctly.

**Example:** Loyalty is like trust: it must be earned.

*Test:* Loyalty is like trust, [**that is**], it must be earned.

3. Use a colon to **link a complete clause with a quotation** that sums up or interprets the clause. The main clause must be able to stand alone as a sentence without the quotation.

**Example:** Shakespeare indicated multiple meanings with Hamlet's words: "To be or not to be, that is the question."

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4. Use a colon to **link a main clause with an appositive**. An **appositive** is a noun or noun phrase that re-names a noun or pronoun.

To test this usage, substitute **namely** for the colon. If **namely** makes sense, the colon has been used properly.

**Examples:** I know the perfect person for the job: Professor Smith.

*Test:* I know the perfect person for the job, [**namely**] Professor Smith.

My job consists of two main responsibilities: tutoring and writing.

*Test:* My job consists of two main responsibilities, [**namely**] tutoring and writing.

### DO NOT DO THIS WHEN USING A COLON

1. Do not use a colon between a verb and its object or complement. Remember, a colon must be preceded by a complete sentence.

**Example:** *Incorrect:* Important components of your grade are: attendance, homework assignments, papers, and exams.

*Correct:* Important components of your grade are attendance, homework assignments, papers, and exams.

2. Do not use a colon between a preposition and its object.

**Example:** *Incorrect:* Each candidate's qualifications must consist of: integrity, diligence, and experience.

*Correct:* Each candidate's qualifications must consist of integrity, diligence, and experience.

3. Do not use a colon after **such as, including, or for example**.

**Example:** *Incorrect:* There are a lot of places to visit on main street **including:** restaurants, a museum, a park, and even an ice cream truck.

*Correct:* There are a lot of places to visit on main street, **including** restaurants, a museum, a park, and even an ice cream truck.

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### SEMICOLON EXERCISES

Insert semicolons where most appropriate in the following sentences.

1. Annette's true motives never surfaced not even her husband understood why she refused to accept early retirement.
2. The war in Vietnam had an impact on Americans unlike that of any other recent war people seemed torn between a deeply engrained patriotism and the ever-growing suspicion that a terrible mistake had been made.
3. World War I ended for the United States in a little over a year World War II lasted almost four years.
4. Familiarity breeds contempt if people got to know one another better, the world would be torn apart.
5. The pleasures of marriage are not understood by the unmarried they think only of emotions and passions far from the contentment of the happily married state.
6. The museums of New York City are rich in art treasures the nightlife is unsurpassed anywhere.
7. The dying man said he would not want even one extra hour upon earth why should he pretend that life was enjoyable?
8. Without art, life would be less human the work of the masters dignifies and enriches our existence.
9. A good critic tries to see the world through the eyes of the playwright whose work he evaluates can it really be this way, are people capable of such actions, is life really so good or so bad?
10. Fear of being caught prevents many honest people from committing crime desire to be caught prevents many criminals from turning honest.

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### COLON EXERCISES:

Place a colon in the correct place for the following sentences. Each sentence has at least one colon.

1. There are many jobs that seem interesting to me painting, singing, photography, and teaching.
2. There were a lot of famous faces on the red carpet Brittany Spears, Lady Gaga, and Nick Jonas.
3. There are a lot of chores I do not like doing dishes, mopping floors, and taking out the trash.
4. He was a world class athlete an Olympic gold medalist.
5. She knew she had to focus on what was most important to her winning.
6. I like all kinds of sweets cheesecake, ice cream, candy, cakes, and pudding.
7. Marie Antoinette is famously known for saying "Let them eat cake"
8. Most of my hobbies are things I can do alone hiking, biking, and painting.
9. There was one thing that just kept getting in our way timing.
10. She prized only one possession her brand new iPhone.