

Semicolons and Colons

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Colons and semicolons are punctuation marks that confound many people. This handout shows how to use them in ways that most academic readers expect.

Two common uses for semicolons

1) A semicolon is much like a period. Use a semicolon to emphasize the link between the ideas of two independent clauses (i.e. phrases that can stand alone as sentences).

Independent clause A

Independent clause B

- I have three dogs and four cats. My animals rule my house.
- I have three dogs and four cats; my animals rule my house.

Of these two punctuation variations in the example above, which do you feel links the two different independent clauses more strongly?

2) Use semicolons to separate items in a complex list, such when you want to explain or elaborate on items in the list. In the example below, using only commas might be confusing.

- My three dogs are Chloe, a golden-retriever/rottweiler mix, Jazz, an American Staffordshire pit bull, and PJ Pocket, the fattest beagle I've ever seen.
- My three dogs are Chloe, a golden-retriever/rottweiler mix; Jazz, an American Staffordshire pit bull; and PJ Pocket, the fattest beagle I've ever seen.

Do you see how semicolons clearly mark the boundaries of each dog and its description? In contrast, the list with only commas might be more confusing for some people to follow.

Common misuses of semicolons are:

- using a semicolon as an “extra-strength” comma
- introducing a list with a semi-colon (see the section on colons on the next page)
- separating an independent clause from a dependent clause with a semicolon

Notes and Tone and Style

Some readers feel that semicolons are unnecessary and are only used by writers trying to show off. We feel that semicolons are like a spice in cooking: less is more. In other words, use them purposefully and in small doses. If you use semicolons to communicate something different than a period, you will draw readers' attention to your choice. Remember that you don't have to use semicolons, but using them in unfamiliar ways can irritate readers who expect them to be used in the ways outlined above.

Two common uses for colons

1) Introduce a list or as an alternative way to introduce a quotation

- I always take the following on my camping trips: a tent, lots of tarps, rope, firewood, matches, a warm jacket, and too much junk food!
- Margaret Atwood, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, poses an intriguing complexity in the meaning of freedom: "There is more than one kind of freedom...Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (p. 24).

2) Introduce an explanation, example, or an appositive

- She had only one goal: to graduate with honors.
- Today, he ate a gyro: a Greek sandwich with meat, vegetables, tzatziki.

Common misuses of colons are:

- separating a verb from its object(s)
 - The basic ingredients for a cake are: flour, eggs, sugar and oil. (Unnecessary)
 - The basic ingredients for a cake are flour, eggs, sugar and oil. (Better)