Semicolons & Colons

This section will help you:

› recognize semicolon and colon errors
› repair semicolon and colon errors
› use semicolons and colons correctly in your own writing

Review of Semicolons and Colons

Semicolons stop the reader’s progress after one complete statement (or independent clause) and signal the appearance of a second independent clause that is closely related in content or meaning.

I wanted rain; I got a flood. (Independent clause; independent clause)

Repairing the old car would be expensive; buying a new car would cost far more.

Hitchhiking is illegal in our town; nevertheless, my friends often thumb rides.

*A semicolon is used only between closely related independent clauses (each containing both a subject and a verb). Do not use a semicolon between a phrase and a complete sentence. Each clause must contain both a subject and a verb.

Incorrect  Bears in the woods; therefore, we stayed in a motel instead of a tent.
Correct  Bears prowled the woods; therefore, we stayed in a motel instead of a tent.

Incorrect  The bears turned out to be cows; unfortunately, the motel bill for $92.
Correct  The bears turned out to be cows; unfortunately, the motel bill was real.

A transitional word or phrase (like consequently, however, or in fact) is often used to make a meaningful connection between two clauses joined by a semicolon. The transitional word is placed in the second clause, not the first, and is **followed by a comma**.

A colon also marks a stop after an independent clause. They are used to signal the introduction of a list, quote, example, or explanation following a complete sentence. (Independent clause: list, quotation, example, or explanation.)

* Use a colon after a complete sentence to introduce an example or explanation in the form of a word, phrase, or clause.

  The teacher insisted on one standard: honesty.
  Two qualities make Oregon an ideal vacation spot: fresh air and lush forests.

* Use a colon to introduce a quotation that follows a complete sentence.

  Every teacher told us the same thing: “What you learn is more important than your grade.”
  She quoted the same thing every year: “Beware, the ides of March.”

* Use a colon to introduce a list that follows a complete sentence.

  Vera’s drawer contained odds and ends: a deck of cards, books of matches, and two balls of string.
  They kidnapper’s requested three things: a million dollars, a getaway car, and dinner.

* Use a colon to introduce an explanation that follows a complete sentence.

  Marion knew why she felt so happy: her final exams were almost over.
  The reason for his popularity is obvious: he enjoys people.
* Colons are also used to separate the hour from minutes in time designations.
  
  He left work at 6:20 p.m.

* Use a colon after the greeting in a formal business letter, as well.

  Dear Sir:
  
  Dear Mrs. Jensen:

* A colon should not be used to separate a verb from its object.

  Incorrect  They collected: pottery, arrowheads, and baskets.
  Correct   They collected pottery, arrowheads, and baskets.

* A colon should also not separate a preposition from its object.

  Incorrect  Most of the guests came from: Japan, China, and India.
  Correct   Most of the guests came from Japan, China, and India.

Key Points to Remember

* Use a semicolon to separate independent clauses if the two clauses are closely related in content or you can substitute a period for the semicolon.

* A semicolon is never used to separate a sentence and a phrase.

* If a transitional word or phrase is used, it belongs in the clause following the semicolon.

* Use a colon after a complete sentence to introduce a list, quotation, example or explanation.

* Do not use a colon to separate a verb or preposition from its object.

* Use a colon to separate the hour from the minutes in time designations.

* Use a colon after the greeting in a business letter.