

Handout Topic: Colons

What is a colon?

The colon is a punctuation mark that is seen regularly in everyday writing, and is often used “to call attention to the words that follow it” (Hacker, *A Canadian Writer’s Reference*, 210). The colon is a mark that indicates an introduction; it signals a further explanation or amplification. It is often used similarly to a dash, although a dash indicates a sharper break.

Colons vs. Semicolons

In many cases, both a semicolon and a colon can be correct marks of punctuation in a sentence. In general, a semicolon is used to indicate a stop while a colon indicates an addition or an amplification. Colons separate elements of unequal importance (with the first element typically being a main clause), while semicolons separate elements of equal importance (typically complete clauses).

How to use a colon:

1. To introduce lists.

e.g. The weather this year has consisted of three things: rain, drizzle and fog.

e.g. I did all of my favorite activities this weekend: eating, sleeping and watching TV.

2. To separate clauses and give emphasis.

e.g. He never likes to go out at night: he is afraid of the dark.

e.g. They have a name for cars that old: junk.

3. To introduce an explanation.

e.g. You all need to remember one thing: lying will get you nowhere.

e.g. Public speaking scares people: getting up in front of all those people makes me nervous, too.

4. To introduce long quotations after a complete sentence.

e.g. Dashiell Hammett's novel *Red Harvest* (1929), has an opening paragraph that will make you laugh:

I first heard Personville called Poisonville by a red-haired mucker named Hickey Dewey in the Big Ship in Butte. He also called his shirt a shoit. I didn't think anything of what he had done to the city's name. Later I heard men who could manage their r's give it the same pronunciation. I still didn't see anything in it but the meaningless sort of humor that used to make richardsnary the thieves' word for dictionary. A few years later I went to Personville and learned better.

5. To indicate divisions in time, or in Biblical citations; to separate subtitles from titles; and to open a formal letter.

e.g. 3:45; 4:56:22 (time)

e.g. Genesis 4:17-19

e.g. Katherine Mansfield: An Introduction to her Short Stories

e.g. Dear Sir:

Exercises: Determine what rule above applies to each sentence (e.g. “to introduce lists”), then insert a colon in the appropriate place.

1. I never liked Jake very much he always chewed with his mouth open.
2. Let the dog in the neighbors lights just came on.
3. I don't watch scary movies my heart is weak.
4. Everyone is going out Friday night I am staying home.
5. Four different ice cream flavours were on display chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, and maple.