Semicolons and Colons

The semicolon (;) and the colon (:) seem like the top hat and monocle of the punctuation world: Everyone would like to wear them, but not many people can. Fortunately, semicolons and colons are much easier to pull off than top hats and monocles. The rules are actually fairly simple.

Semicolons

Semicolons have a few different uses, but they can be divided into two categories: combining sentences and avoiding confusion.

Combining Sentences

Semicolons are commonly used to join closely related independent clauses. In the following example, the incorrect version contains an independent clause and a dependent clause. All that needs to be done to correct it is to remove the subordinating conjunction “because”:

Incorrect: I apologize for being late; because the highway was gridlocked.
Correct: I apologize for being late; the highway was gridlocked.

Remember that the sentences that semicolons join should be closely related. It would be incorrect to use a semicolon to write “I love pizza; the highway was gridlocked.”

Semicolons can also join independent clauses linked by a conjunctive adverb, such as however or therefore. Using a comma instead of a semicolon, as in the following example, is a fairly common mistake.

Incorrect: The restaurant is very far away, however, we can get there quickly if traffic is light.
Correct: The restaurant is very far away; however, we can get there quickly if traffic is light.

Avoiding Confusion

One of the rarer uses of a semicolon is to avoid confusion when joining two long or complicated independent clauses, even when they are linked by a coordinating conjunction (in which case one would normally use a comma). In the following example, there are so many and’s in the sentence that it would be confusing to use a comma:

“By a conscious effort of the mind, we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent.”

- Henry David Thoreau

Finally, semicolons can also ensure clarity when items in a list are very long or contain commas. In the following example, the items in the list are 1) “my wife, Allison,” 2) “my older brother, Robert,” and 3) “my best friend, Jordan.”
Confusing: I took a trip to Europe last summer with my wife, Allison, my older brother, Robert, and my best friend, Jordan.

Clear: I took a trip to Europe last summer with my wife, Allison; my older brother, Robert; and my best friend, Jordan.

Because these items contain commas, using a semicolon instead of another comma makes the division between the items more clear.

Overuse
Although semicolons can be useful, be careful of over using them. Use semicolons sparingly.

Overuse: The Dallas-Fort Worth area is the largest, non-coastal metropolitan region in the US; it is larger than Connecticut. The Greater Houston area is not as large; however, it’s faster growing; someday it might overtake the Dallas-Fort Worth area in size.

Revised: The Dallas-Fort Worth area is the largest, non-coastal metropolitan region in the US. It is larger than Connecticut. The Greater Houston area is not as large; however, it’s faster growing. Someday it might overtake the Dallas-Fort Worth area in size.

The first example uses far too many semicolons. As a result, the “flow” and meaning of the writing suffers because every idea is strung together.

Colons
Colons can only ever be placed after complete sentences. If you find yourself placing a colon directly after a verb or a preposition, don’t do it! Colons are commonly used to introduce three things: explanations, items in a series, or long quotations.

Explanations
When a sentence requires further explanation or introduces a definition, use a colon to introduce the addition.

Incorrect: My only irrational fear involves: getting nervous every time I board an airplane.
Revised: I have only one irrational fear: I get nervous every time I board an airplane.

In the incorrect version, the colon interrupts what would be a complete sentence if it was not there. Notice that it falls directly after the verb. The revised version corrects that by turning the sentence into two different independent clauses.

Note: Some styles, such as APA, require the first word of an independent clause after a colon to be capitalized, while others do not. Check your style guide to be sure.
Items in a series
Colons can also introduce lists that follow an independent clause.

Incorrect: To drive safely, remember: do not tailgate, signal when changing lanes, and stay out of other drivers' blind spots.
Revised: To drive safely, follow these guidelines: do not tailgate, signal when changing lanes, and stay out of other drivers' blind spots.

Again, the incorrect example uses a colon following an incomplete sentence, and the revised version uses the colon after a complete sentence.

Long or formal quotations
You can also use colons to introduce long quotations. In the following example, the colon follows a complete sentence and precedes a long, direct quote.

The mayor presented his plan to alleviate traffic: “By the end of next year, we will be offering companies incentives to institute a 'Work-at-Home' program, which will allow their employees to work from their homes for a few days of the week. This plan will effectively decrease the number of cars on the road and help reduce our gasoline dependency.”

Contact
Want to talk about using semicolons and colons? Come work with a tutor at the Writing Center! Drop by or use the information below to contact us and set up an appointment.

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