

# Using Colons and Semicolons in Academic Writing

Many writers are unfamiliar with how to use both **colons (:)** and **semicolons (;)** in academic writing. Often, they will use both marks interchangeably or inappropriately use another punctuation mark, like a period or comma. Misused colons and semicolons in your writing can result in grammatically incorrect sentence structures, which can confuse readers. Here are some guidelines when using colons and semicolons.

## COLONS (:)

A colon is a form of punctuation often used to set up and draw the reader's attention to the ideas that come after it. A colon can be used in 4 ways:

### 1. To introduce a list or series at the end of a complete sentence (a sentence that can stand on its own).

#### Examples:

*Writers can visit Student Writing Support at any stage of their writing process: brainstorming, outlining, drafting, or revising.*

*Writing a college level paper requires several steps: outline, first draft, revise, second draft, revise, and submit.*

**Tip:** To test if you have used a colon properly, substitute the colon with the phrase **'namely'**. Usually, if 'namely' makes sense in the sentence, the colon has been used correctly.

**Test:** Writing a college level paper requires several steps, [namely] outline, first draft, revise, second draft, revise, and submit.

### 2. To separate complete sentences, when the second sentence further explains or re-states the first sentence.

#### Examples:

*Minds are like parachutes: they only work when they are open.*

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

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

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

### 3. To link a complete sentence with a quotation that sums up or interprets the sentence.

#### Examples:

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

*My baseball coach loves to use the same phrase before every practice and game: "Shut up and play baseball."*

#### 4. To separate the title from the subtitle.

Examples:

*Writing for university: **A student guide to successful essays.***

*The textbook for our class is called **Ideas across Time: Classic and Contemporary Readings for Composition.***

**Note:** Notice the use of **upper case** after the colon in a title.

When NOT to use 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.

Examples:

**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.**

Examples:

**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', 'namely' or 'for example'.**

Examples:

**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.*

**Incorrect:** *Ice cream comes in many delicious flavours, **such as:** bubble gum, vanilla, and chocolate.*

**Correct:** *Ice cream comes in many delicious flavours, **such as** bubble gum, vanilla, and chocolate.*

## SEMICOLONS (:)

A semicolon is a form of punctuation often used to indicate a pause (typically between two main clauses) that is more pronounced than that indicated by a comma. Using a semicolon can bring precision, subtlety, and nuance to your writing. A semicolon can be used in 4 ways:

1. **To separate two independent clauses (complete thoughts/sentences) that are closely related in content or theme.** In this case, the semicolon is used to separate sentences that need a stronger break than a comma but are too close in meaning to use a full stop.

### Examples:

*Few enrolling students know exactly what career their studies will offer them; most find their area of interest during their studies.*

*Writing centres are great; they teach students how to become better writers.*

2. **To separate complex items in a list that already has commas.**

### Examples:

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

*The Beatles were John Lennon, guitarist; Paul McCartney, bassist; George Harrison, guitarist; and Ringo Starr, drummer.*

3. **To separate in-text references in the APA system when you are citing more than one item.**

### Examples:

*(Atkinson, 2007; Smith et al., 2020; Jackson & Brown, 2008; Strongman et al., 2009)*

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

**Transitional connectives (or cohesive words/phrases):** *furthermore, likewise, in addition, moreover, so, yet, however, also, besides, consequently, hence, since, then, nevertheless, therefore.*

### Examples:

*His eyesight deteriorated; **consequently**, he had to resign as a proof reader.*

*My fingers were cramping from overuse; **nonetheless**, I continued to type*

## When NOT to use a 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. On the other hand, the semicolon is never used between an independent and a dependent clause (*see explanation about dependent/independent clauses in resource about 'sentence structure'*).

### Examples:

**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.

### Examples:

**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.*

**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.

### Examples:

*Call me tomorrow. You can give me an answer then.*

*I have paid my dues. I expect all privileges listed in the contract.*

### **Better to use a semicolon:**

*Call me tomorrow; you can give me an answer then.*

*I have paid my dues; I expect all privileges listed in the contract.*

Adapted from:

Concordia University, USA. Semicolons and Colons. Available at: <http://concordia.csp.edu/writingcenter/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/semicolons-and-colons.pdf> (accessed: 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2021)

Johnson County Community College, USA. Semicolons and Colons. Available at: <https://www.jccc.edu/student-resources/academic-resource-center/writing-center/files/colons-and-semicolons.pdf> (accessed: 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2021)

Compiled by: Neelakshi Mungra, 2021. Revised, 2024.