

Semicolons, Colons, and Dashes

“No other piece of punctuation so compactly captures the way in which our thoughts are both liquid and solid, wave and particle.” – from “Semicolons: A Love Story”¹

Unlike periods and commas, which are so ubiquitous that they become second nature to us, semicolons, colons, and dashes frequently mystify students. Perhaps this is because these punctuation marks are reserved for stylistic usage – the basics of written English require only periods and commas. Or perhaps it is because these rarer forms of punctuation are rarely covered in elementary school grammar lessons. Whatever the reason, semicolons, colons, and dashes are actually far less confusing than commas. Unlike commas, they have very specific uses that can be explained on a single side of a handout.

SEMICOLONS

Semicolons are most commonly used to connect two complete sentences that are closely related in meaning. They are the grammatical equivalent to a period (full stop) or a coordinating conjunction that comes after a comma. To make sure that you are using a semicolon correctly, ensure that the sentences on either side of the semicolon could stand by themselves.

Incorrect:

Told she would not succeed; nevertheless, she persisted.
(first sentence lacks a subject)

Correct:

They told her she would not succeed; nevertheless, she persisted.

Incorrect:

Pulling on her combat boots and putting her hair in a ponytail; she was ready.

Correct:

She pulled on her combat boots and put her hair in a ponytail; she was ready.

For more on what constitutes a “complete sentence,” see the “Fragments and Run-Ons” and “Coordinating Conjunctions” handouts.

There is one other specific use for semi-colons: lists. When the items in a list contain commas (causing confusion if additional commas were used to separate them), semi-colons are used to separate each item.

Examples:

On our road trip, we went to Moab, UT; Flagstaff, AZ; Albuquerque, NM; and El Paso, TX.

We brought light jackets, necessary for the high altitudes of Flagstaff; sunscreen, for our desert hikes; and swimsuits, which we did not end up using.

¹ Dolnick, B. (2 July 2012). “Semicolons: A Love Story.” *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/02/semicolons-a-love-story/?_r=0

This handout is adapted from materials originally created by Sue Mendelsohn and Tamara Smith of the University Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin (uwc.utexas.edu).

COLONS

Like semi-colons, colons are used to separate clauses. But colon usage is more specific than semicolon usage. When using a colon, the phrase that comes before the colon should always be a complete sentence. What comes after the colon will vary. Here is a good rule of thumb: if you can replace a colon with “namely” or “that is” you are using it correctly, although this is not always true (as with example #4 here). Colons can be used...

- 1) To introduce examples, explanations, or specific words or phrases.

Kurt Vonnegut wrote in a genre much-beloved by teens and young adults: science fiction.

- 2) To introduce lists.

When Vonnegut graded his published works, he gave six novels either an A or an A+: *Slaughterhouse-Five* (A+); *Cat's Cradle* (A+); *The Sirens of Titan* (A); *Mother Night* (A); *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (A); and *Jailbird* (A).²

- 3) To introduce dialogue or quotations.

Vonnegut once said of semicolons: “All they do is show you’ve been to college.”

- 4) To join two complete sentences when the second illustrates or explains the first.

There are two possible explanations for the events of *Slaughterhouse-Five*: either Billy Pilgrim is suffering from hallucinations induced by undiagnosed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or he really was abducted by time-traveling aliens.

DASHES

Dashes are often confused with hyphens because both are horizontal lines. Compounding this confusion is the fact that an em-dash (the most common form of the dash) formatted on most keyboards by typing the hyphen key (-) twice in a row. In Microsoft Word, you also need to include a letter (no space) after the double hyphen in order to properly format an em-dash.

The good news about em-dashes is that they are entirely optional. They serve the same basic function as commas, parentheses, or colons—that is, they set information apart from a sentence. Here are some basic uses of the em-dash:

1. Separate and emphasize a dependent clause within a sentence.

He gathered the sandwiches—all twelve of them—and threw them in the river.

2. Replace colons for a more conversational tone.

The days flew by as we approached the most dreadful time of the year—the end of summer.

3. Replace parentheses for a more conversational tone.

He bought a Mercedes—bright red, of course—to celebrate the divorce.

² Note the use of semicolons in this list, as *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* contains a comma.

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