

The Semicolon

A semicolon has two principal functions: to connect independent clauses and to separate items in a series when the use of commas alone would leave the meaning unclear.

1. If you wish to emphasize the close relationship between two independent clauses, you may write them as one sentence, employing a semicolon where you would usually place a period.

For example:

Some literary critics have called Mark Twain the greatest American novelist; others prefer Herman Melville.

Mother and Father will leave for the shore at six o'clock; the rest of the family will wait until seven.

Alexander was eager to begin conquering the world right away; however, Aristotle preferred to remain at home.

In two hours the hurricane will strike; consequently, I think I ought to be getting home.

2. Semicolons are used to separate items in a series when the items themselves contain commas.

For example:

Among the legislators observed entering the caucus room were the senator from Illinois, Charles Percy; the senator from Indiana, Richard Lugar; the senator from Ohio, John Glenn; and the senator from West Virginia, Robert Byrd.

Three of our party failed to make it to the concert: George, who had pneumonia that particular evening; Bruce, who confused the Spectrum with the Academy of Music; and Gloria, who had a flat tire on the expressway.

3. Occasionally semicolons are used to separate independent clauses joined by coordinating conjunctions, but only when the clauses contain so many commas that the semicolon is necessary to keep the reader from getting confused.

For example:

If the counsel of William Jennings Bryan, the pacifist Secretary of State, had prevailed, the administration would not have embarked on the course that subsequently led to America's entry into World War I; yet it was this very entry, paradoxically, which was later to give Wilson the leverage he needed to secure the postwar peace through the establishment of the League of Nations at Versailles.

The Colon

The colon has three principal functions.

1. A colon is used to separate the title and the subtitle of a book.

At the Edge of History: Speculations on the Transformation of Culture

Doings and Undoings: The Fifties and After in American Writing

On Love: Aspects of a Single Theme

2. A colon is placed after the salutation of a formal letter.

Dear Sir:

Dear Mr. Costello:

3. A colon is used after an independent clause leading up to and introducing a list, a word, a phrase, or an explanatory sentence. (A colon should not be used after a verb.)

A colon used to introduce a list

The United States has three coastlines: the Atlantic Coast, the Pacific Coast, and the Gulf Coast.

I had three chairs in my house: one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society.

--Henry David Thoreau

A colon used to introduce (a) word(s)

He had crawled for nearly three weeks through the beastly Sahara with but one thought on his mind: water.

The Roman Empire might have survived the fifth century invasions if it had not been for the vices that plagued the imperial court: corruption and sloth.

A colon used to introduce a phrase

She had one objective that summer: to become a good swimmer.

After realizing that Macbeth had murdered his family, Macduff had only one goal: to get revenge.

A Colon used to introduce an explanatory sentence

Working on his car was more than a hobby: his car was his life.

Orpheus looked again: the dog had three heads, one more than he had expected.