



## COLONS AND SEMICOLONS

Student writers, and many other writers, too, frequently confuse the functions of colons and semicolons. Both are internal stops. Like commas and dashes, they stand inside a sentence, not at its end. But their specific functions are relatively easy to differentiate. A **colon** usually introduces the reader to whatever follows it, signaling: “Here is something you should pay attention to.” A **semicolon**, by contrast, joins together two independently expressed ideas; it also implies a relationship between them.

Below are lists of the most common uses of colons and semicolons, with examples drawn largely from an informal writer’s guide called *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* by Anne Lamott.

### The Colon

1. Colons frequently introduce a more specific or particular statement that amplifies or clarifies the preceding one. That which follows the colon may be a complete clause or simply a word or phrase.

*“I wish there were an easier, softer way, a shortcut, but this is the nature of most good writing: that you find out things as you go along. Then you go back and rewrite. Remember: no one is reading your first drafts” (71).*

2. A writer can also use a colon to introduce a series.

*“... in the garden, the enemy is everything: the aphids, the weather, time” (78).*

3. Scholarly writers frequently use colons to introduce quotations, especially long ones. (For a more detailed discussion of punctuating quotations, see the Writing Center’s handout, “Using Quotations.”)

*“[Capturing my ‘inner vision’ in writing] always reminds me of the last lines of Rabbit Run: ‘his heels hitting heavily on the pavement at first but with an effortless gathering out of a kind of sweet panic growing lighter and quicker and quieter, he runs. Ah: runs. Runs’” (9-10).*

### The Semicolon

1. Most commonly, semicolons link two closely related, complete sentences, eliminating the need for a comma and coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet) to join them. You must choose either to use a semicolon or to use the comma + coordinating conjunction set. A comma by itself constitutes a comma splice. A semicolon with a coordinating conjunction is not grammatically correct.

*"I read more than other kids; I luxuriated in books: (xxii).*

2. Semicolons can also be used together with transitional phrases or conjunctive adverbs in order to emphasize a pause and the nature of the relationship between two independent clauses. Examples of conjunctive adverbs: consequently, finally, however, indeed, instead, similarly, specifically, therefore  
Examples of transitional phrases: as a result, even so, for example, in conclusion, on the other hand, in other words

*"He swallowed a lot of wisdom; however, it seemed as if all of it had gone down the wrong way."*  
- G.C. Lichtenberg [example from A Pocket Manual of Style, Third Edition, by Diana Hacker]

### **[Run-on Sentences**

Two or more independent clauses (or complete sentences) joined without either a coordinating word or a semicolon constitute a run-on sentence, a common grammatical error. Complete clauses, even relatively short ones, such as those in Lamott's sentence "I read more than other kids; I luxuriated in books," should be joined either by a semicolon or a conjunction. If you merely link them with a comma, you've created a particular type of run-on, a *comma splice* or *comma fault*. (For stylistic reasons, writers sometimes choose to join very short, simple, and clearly related clauses with commas, but when you are writing academic papers, you do not want to risk appearing as if you are making a grammatical error.)]

### **Related Writing Center Handouts**

Commas: Some Common Problems

Using Quotations

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