

The Writing Center

Colons and Semi-Colons

The colon and the semicolon are both forms of punctuation that provide medium separation and emphasis. They may look fairly similar, but they have very different uses.

Use a **colon** for the following:

- **To make an announcement or set the reader up for a surprise (a.k.a. The “Wait For It...” Colon)**

This much is clear, Detective Smith: the intruder was wearing a Spider-Man costume.

(This much is clear, Detective Smith – *wait for it!* – the intruder was wearing a Spider-Man costume.)

Tom has only one rule in life: never eat anything bigger than your head.

(Tom has only one rule in life – *wait for it!* – never eat anything bigger than your head.)

- **To start a list.**

The Chinese zodiac has twelve signs: Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Goat, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, and Pig.

- *Be careful not to use a colon after a verb.*
- I want: butter, sugar, and eggs. (INCORRECT EXAMPLE)
- I want the following: butter, sugar, and eggs. (CORRECT EXAMPLE)

Semi-colons have two primary uses:

- **To join two complete, related sentences when there’s no coordinating conjunction (such as *but* or *and*) and a comma would be ungrammatical**

I love New Kids on the Block; I’m so glad they’re back together.

The magician was amazing; the audience went wild when he made Buckingham Fountain disappear.

- *Remember, a comma can never be used to join two complete sentences! Use a semi-colon instead.*

- **To make a bunch of competing commas more manageable and easier to understand**

Justin Timberlake had to reschedule concerts in Indianapolis, Indiana; Chicago, Illinois;

Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Little Rock, Arkansas due to laryngitis.

Practice: Colons & Semicolons

A. In each of the following sentences, insert colons or semicolons wherever they are needed.

1. Only five actors have won back-to-back Academy Awards Tom Hanks, Spencer Tracy, Luise Rainer, Katharine Hepburn, and Jason Robards.
2. Chicago's parking problem must be solved otherwise, people will start leaving their cars on the sidewalk.
3. The cafeteria offered a choice of ham, turkey, or salami sandwiches potato chips, French Fries, or salad and milk, soda, or juice.
4. Scrooge McDuck has one major flaw in his personality greed.
5. After weeks of deliberation, the retired English teachers finally agreed upon a name for their heavy metal band The Comma Splices.
6. The bank president was very cordial however, he wouldn't hand over all of the money when I asked for it.
7. One thing is obvious, Ms. Kardashian you should never get married.
8. One of the best ways to remember a vacation is to take numerous pictures one of the best ways to remember your date's name is to steal her driver's license.
9. The college offers four computer courses PowerPoint, Photoshop, Typing, and How to Upload Shaky Skateboarding Videos to YouTube.
10. Justine wants to go to the Justin Bieber concert on Friday night Theo would rather die.

B. Your turn! On your own sheet of paper, write a sentence that:

1. Uses a colon to start a list.
2. Uses a colon to make an announcement or set the reader up for a surprise.
3. Uses a semicolon to join two complete, related sentences.
4. Uses a semicolon to make a series of competing commas more manageable.