

JOHNSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

## Semicolon and Colon Rules

### Semicolons

Use a semicolon **between two independent clauses not connected by a coordinating conjunction**.

Try this one; red seems to be your color.

His mother won't let him; she is afraid he might get hurt.

Your car is new; mine is eight years old.

In each of these sentences a period could be used instead of the semicolon. But the clauses, even though grammatically independent, are **so closely related** that a period makes too sharp a separation.

The semicolon provides a more emphatic separation than the comma; it affords **an easier transition between statements than the period**; it is, therefore, the most appropriate punctuation to balance two contrasted ideas parallel in form.

Take care of the children; the adults can take care of themselves.

It was not the hours or the wages that discouraged me; it was the constant monotony of the work.

Wade held the ball for an instant; then he passed it to West.

"He is sick," she said; "therefore, he will not come."

Use a semicolon to **separate independent clauses which are long and complex or which have internal punctuation**.

I invited Sara, Susan, Leon, and John to the party; Joe, Robert, and Charles also dropped in.

Use semicolons in a **series between items which have internal punctuation**. Do not use a semicolon between elements which are not coordinate.

Among those present were Dr. Holmes, pastor of the First Methodist Church; A. C. Levitt, superintendent of schools; B. L. Rainey, manager of the Benson Hotel; and M. T. Cord, vice president of Miller and Sons.

Use semicolons to **avoid confusion when commas that are used between elements in a series to set off appositives are present**.

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

Use a semicolon **before a transitional connective (conjunctive adverb) between two main clauses**. The most common transitional connectives are *also*, *besides*, *consequently*, *furthermore*, *hence*, *however*, *likewise*, *moreover*, *nevertheless*, *in addition*, *since*, *so*, *then*, *therefore*, *yet*.

It won't work; **therefore**, there is no sense in buying it.

His argument has some merit; **however**, he goes too far.

His eyes went bad; **consequently**, he had to resign his position as a proofreader.

### **Misuse of the Semicolon**

**Do not use a semicolon as the equivalent of a colon**. Although their names suggest a close relationship, semicolons and colons have quite different uses and are not interchangeable. The colon is used chiefly to indicate that something is to follow, usually a series of items; the semicolon is never used between an independent clause and a subordinate construction. In the following sentences the faulty semicolon is followed by the correct colon in parentheses.

My records show that the following students have not handed in the assignment; (:) Mr. Andrews, Mr. Richardson, Mr. Smith, and Miss Wallace.

Dear Sir; (:) May I call your attention to an error...

**Do not use a semicolon as the equivalent of a comma**. A comma is internal punctuation and is used only within a sentence; a semicolon is a stronger mark and, as we have seen, is used between grammatically independent statements. A semicolon may be substituted for a comma between main clauses joined by a conjunction when more emphatic punctuation is desired. (*My old job paid higher wages; but the new one offers a brighter future*); but a semicolon cannot be substituted for a comma between a main clause and a subordinate construction. In the following examples the faulty semicolon is followed by the correct comma in parentheses.

Although I seldom have trouble with grammar or spelling; (,) I never seem to use the right punctuation.

We stayed up until two o'clock in the morning; (,) hoping that they would arrive.

We could come to only one conclusion; (,) that his mother had changed her mind.

**Avoid indiscriminate substitution of semicolons for periods.** Using a semicolon for a period will do less harm than using a semicolon for a colon or a comma. Yet the semicolon and the period have different functions and should not be used interchangeably. The normal punctuation between independent statements is the period. Between sentences this is the conventional mark to use; but if a writer wishes to relate the two sentences more closely than a period would permit, he or she may use a semicolon. This specialized substitution, however, does not abolish the distinction between the two marks. In the following passage the parenthetical periods are preferable to semicolons. (The first word following the period would, of course, be capitalized.)

Today it is easy to smile at such superstitions and to assume that they are the products of an uncivilized age, but the close association of words and things which is the basis of word magic is a subtle association which persists even in the thinking of highly civilized societies; (,) some of the opposition to daylight-saving time illustrates this confusion of word and thing; (,) people uneasily suspect that if they turn the hands of the clock ahead, they have dropped an hour out of their lives; (,) often the best argument for such people is not to deny that they will have "lost" an hour, but to promise that they will get it back in the fall; (,) the common practice of skipping thirteen in numbering the floors and rooms of a hotel is another illustration of the lingering belief in word magic.

## Colons

Use a colon **before quotations, statements, and series which are introduced formally.**

His favorite poets are these: Milton, Donne, and Keats.

**Do NOT use a colon after a linking verb or a preposition.**

**WRONG:** His favorite poets are: Milton, Donne, and Keats.

**Do NOT use a colon before informal examples using *such as* or *especially*;** use a comma.

She enjoys outdoor sports, such as hiking and riding.

He likes all crafts, especially wood carving.

**To indicate that something is to follow, especially a formal series,** use a colon.

Here are the facts: The money was there five minutes before he entered the room; it was missing immediately after he left; the next day he bought a new suit, although he had previously spent all of this month's allowance.

The slogan goes like this: Look sharp! Feel sharp! Be sharp!

Use a colon **in place of a comma before long or formal direct quotations.**

In that speech Bryan said: "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor a crown of thorns; you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold."

This is his statement as reported in the papers: "I have never advocated such ideas; I do not advocate them now; I do not approve of them; and I have no reason for believing that I ever will approve of them."

Use a colon **between two independent clauses when the second explains or amplifies the first.**

Use a colon **before formal appositives**, including those introduced by such expressions as *namely* and *that is*.

One characteristic that accounts for his success: complete honesty.

His motives are clear: he intends to become a dictator. (Second main clause explains first.)

King Midas cared about only one thing: gold. (Appositive.)

For sale: mountain cabin. (Additional material.)

Use a colon **before a clause which is intended to restate in different form the idea of the preceding clause.** In each of the following examples the clause following the colon says, in another way, what was already said in the clause preceding the colon. The restatement, however, is not needless repetition: it serves to illustrate or amplify the content of the preceding clause.

*Henry V* is one of the great experiences in the history of motion pictures. It is not, to be sure, the greatest: the creation of new dramatic poetry is more important than the recreation of the old.

Except for differences of subject matter, the rules of grammar are exactly like the laws of physics and chemistry: they are scientific generalizations about the facts.

Use a colon **between hours and minutes to indicate time, after the salutation of a formal letter, and between city and publisher in bibliographical entries.**

Dear Sir:

8:40 a.m.

John 3:16

Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill

The word *Resolved* must be separated by a colon from the statement of resolution.

Resolved: That this committee go on record as favoring new legislation.

The name of the speaker in a play should be separated by a colon from his lines.

Macbeth: She should have died hereafter: There should have been a time for such a word.

### Practice Exercise A

Insert a colon or semicolon where most appropriate in the following sentences.

Examples:

Annette's true motives never surfaced: not even her husband understood why she refused to accept early retirement.

The storekeeper pointed grimly to the sign above the cash register: "In God We Trust. All Others Pay Cash."

1. The war in Vietnam had an impact on Americans unlike that of any other recent war people seemed torn between a deeply engrained patriotism and the ever-growing suspicion that a terrible mistake had been made.
2. World War I ended for the United States in a little over a year World War II lasted almost four years.
3. Familiarity breeds contempt if people got to know one another better, the world would be torn apart.

4. The pleasures of marriage are not understood by the unmarried they think only of emotions and passions far from the contentment of the happily married state.
5. The museums of New York City are rich in art treasures the nightlife is unsurpassed anywhere.
6. The dying man said he would not want even one extra hour upon earth why should he pretend that life was enjoyable?
7. Without art life would be less human the work of the masters dignifies and enriches our existence.
8. Thinking of suicide consoles the desperate such thoughts help one get through many bad nights.
9. A good critic tries to see the world through the eyes of the playwright whose work he evaluates can it really be this way, are people capable of such actions, is life really so good or so bad?
10. Fear of being caught prevents many honest people from committing crime desire to be caught prevents many criminals from turning honest.

### **Practice Exercise B**

Each of the following sentences is fully punctuated except for a semicolon or colon. Insert the required marks in each sentence.

Examples:

I am interested in acquiring works of the following composers: Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven.

The restaurant has now closed for the winter; the hotel, of course, remains open year round.

1. Several counties were hurt by the recent hurricane Westchester, Suffolk, Putnam, and Nassau.
2. Our group will meet on Thursday night if a quorum is assured otherwise, the next meeting will be delayed one month.

3. When the store reopens for business, certain clerks will no longer be working there MB. Chadwick, Mrs. Taylor, and Mr. Forsythe.

4. I would be pleased to have your comments regarding Arlene, who led the group in song my supervisor is considering her for promotion to leader of the combined chorus and has asked me to collect whatever information is available on her musicianship, leadership qualities, and reliability.

5. The manuscript left many unanswered questions Are the archives complete? Are the documents well preserved? Are scholars encouraged to use the facility?

6. Kentucky and Tennessee burley tobaccos were carefully cultivated, harvested, selected, and aged to give the coolest smoke possible yet careless packaging, despite the best efforts of the company to control all aspects of distribution, ruined thousands of pounds of the prize mixture. -

7. We are interested in obtaining one copy of each of the following

John T. Gause, *The Complete Word Hunter*

Alfred H. Holt, *Phrase and Word Origins*

C. C. Bombaugh, *Oddities and Curiosities of Words and Literature*

8. Can you define the following terms feminine rhyme, masculine rhyme, double rhyme, triple rhyme, end rhyme, and internal rhyme?

9. *Chiasmus* is defined as the use of phrases that are syntactically parallel but with their elements reversed, as in this line from Pope "Works without show, and without pomp presides."

10. We all admire her wizardry with words her ineptness with people destroys whatever effectiveness she otherwise has.