



Palm Beach Atlantic University
Center for Writing Excellence

COLONS AND SEMICOLONS

The colon: Before a list

Incorrect: The Doctor takes the following people or persons on his time traveling adventures, humans, aliens, robots and plants.

The commas here do not clearly separate the items being listed.

Correct: The Doctor takes the following people or persons on his time traveling adventures: humans, aliens, robots and plants.

The colon allows the list to be separated clearly from the subject of the sentence.

**Note:* A colon should not precede a list unless it follows a complete sentence.

The colon: Separates an independent clause from a quotation

Incorrect: The literature professor often used her favorite quotation from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. "To be, or not to be: that is the question."

The period after "Hamlet" separates these two sentences and is less formal.

Correct: The literature professor often used her favorite quotation from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "To be, or not to be: that is the question."

The colon connects the two sentences, forming a more formal phrase.

**Note:* If the independent clause coming after the colon is a formal quote—as in the example above—begin that quoted language with a capital letter.

The colon: Addressing a person in a business letter

Incorrect: Dear Mr. Holmes,

This form is less formal for a business letter.

Correct: Dear Mr. Holmes:

This example is more formal for a business letter.

The Semicolon: Separates a long list where the items are phrases

Incorrect: There were students from outside Orlando, all along the Caloosahatchee River, east of Nashville, all around the northwest suburbs of Chicago, and west of Volcano, Hawaii.

The commas inadequately separate the lengthy descriptions of the locations.

Correct: There were students from outside Orlando; all along the Caloosahatchee River; east of Nashville; all around the northwest suburbs of Chicago; and west of Volcano, Hawaii.

The semicolon separates each location providing more clarity.

The Semicolon: Separates closely related sentences.

Incorrect: My sister seldom goes to bed this early, she's afraid she'll miss out on something.

This sentence is a comma splice because only a comma separates two complete thoughts.

Correct: My sister seldom goes to bed this early; she's afraid she'll miss out on something.

Now the sentences are tied together and form one complete thought with the proper punctuation.