

COLONS AND DASHES

EN 101

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Questions for Review

- ❖ What is a colon?
- ❖ What is a dash?
- ❖ When is it appropriate to use a colon?
- ❖ When is it inappropriate to use a colon?
- ❖ When is it appropriate to use a dash?
- ❖ Why should writers beware overusing the dash?

What is a colon?

The **colon (:)** has two purposes in a sentence:

1. To begin a list.

After the wreck, Craig was a mass of injuries: broken femur, shattered ribs, fractured cranium, and bruised lungs.

2. To join two independent clauses when the first clause predicts or prepares for the second. (To word the other way around, the second clause explains the first).

When I arrived home, Rufus slunk away from me, ducking his head and whining guiltily: he had ripped the sofa cushions apart again.

Big No-No

What comes before a colon must be able to stand alone as a separate sentence.

Bad:

The three most important things for a five-year-old child are: Mommy, Daddy, and home.

Good:

Three things are most important for a five-year-old child: Mommy, Daddy, and home.

Colon Screening

- To test whether you have used a colon correctly, delete the information after the colon: Is what is left a sentence that can stand alone?

- Ex's from previous slide:
 - ▣ The three most important things for a five-year-old child are.
 - *Doesn't make sense – you can't use a colon.*

 - ▣ Three things are most important for a five-year-old child.
 - *Does make sense – you may use a colon.*

Further examples

- The preacher in the book of Ecclesiastes is disillusioned with life: again and again, he preaches that his hearers' dreams and ambitions are “vanity of vanities.”
 - ▣ (Yep – checks out. You can put a period after “disillusioned with life”).

- Lost and bewildered, the hiker pondered two options: should he try to find his way out of the woods, or should he wait for help to arrive?
 - ▣ (This checks out too – you can put a period after “options”).

Additional Uses for Colons:

To introduce a list.

The doctor told me to avoid the following: salt, chocolate, caffeine, and artificial preservatives.

To introduce material that explains something in the first clause.

Many graduate students discover that there is a dark side to academia: late nights, high stress, and a crippling addiction to caffeinated beverages..

To introduce an example of something in the first clause.

Jake has become a compulsive buyer: Just yesterday, he spent a hundred on a silk shirt and fifty dollars on a leather belt.

To introduce a quotation.

Shakespeare said it best: “To thine own self be true.”

What is a dash?

The **dash** (--) is the strongest mark of punctuation, strong enough to join nearly anything the writer feels like putting together.

All the other marks of punctuation have instances where they are too weak to work. The dash always works.

Punctuational Weaknesses

- The comma needs a coordinating conjunction to join two independent clauses. The dash can join two independent clauses all by itself.
- The semicolon can only join clauses of the same length. The dash can join clauses no matter what.
- The colon only works if what comes before it is a complete sentence. The dash can come and go anywhere it pleases.

The many uses of the dash

To set off material for emphasis

After eighty years of dreaming, the elderly man realized it was time to finally revisit the land of his youth—Ireland.

To indicate sentence introductions and conclusions

Books, paper, pencils—many students lacked even the simplest tools for learning in nineteenth-century America.

To mark off interrupter phrases

Even the simplest tasks—washing, dressing, and going to work—were nearly impossible after I broke my leg.

To join clauses

It is easy to use the dash – it can work practically anywhere.

Warning!

- Because the dash is so useful, many writers overuse it.
- Because the dash is overused, it has come to be regarded by many professors as slang or informal.
- As such, be especially careful about overusing the dash when writing academic assignments – if you overuse it, your professor might be offended by your informal tone.