Learning Support at the Library

Semi-colons and Colons

These two lovely punctuation marks are usually the last to be learned. They have a limited number of appropriate uses but, when their turn comes, they truly shine. Sometimes a dash or even a period can correctly replace them, but the subtle implications to the reader are then lost.

Semi-colon

The semi-colon has two primary uses.

1. A semi-colon can be used to separate two independent clauses. (An independent clause could stand on its own as a sentence.) There needs to be some reason to bind them together in the same sentence, though; there should be some strong connection or link between the two.

   **Examples:**
   There is no way to travel faster than the speed of light; that concept defies the laws of physics.

   The president chairs all the meetings; the vice-president chairs meetings only when the president is absent.

   Note that a semi-colon is also used when the second clause begins with a conjunctive adverb or adverbial phrase, such as “however,” “consequently,” “as a result,” “therefore,” or “for example.”

   **Example:** The fire drill was a success; however, there were still ways to improve the evacuation process.

   **BUT** be careful that the semi-colon is always used to separate the independent clauses, even when the adverb is moved away from the start of the clause.

   **Example:** Poor grammar can be costly in more than just an English class; it might, for example, create a misstatement in a history essay that makes you appear not to understand the material.

2. A semi-colon also serves as a “promoted” comma to break up a list of phrases, one or more of which already contain internal punctuation. This helps clarify the separation between list items.
Example: In a desperate attempt to be granted a rewrite on the exam, the student told the instructor that he had acquired chicken pox; that he had, on the evening prior to the exam, learned his grandmother had died; that his only parent, who relied on the student for help around the house, was too hung over to feed himself; and that his newly acquired blindness made it impossible for him to study.

Colon

A colon is used to urge the reader forward into a clarification, amplification, or a series of examples of a stated idea. With a few exceptions, the colon should follow an independent clause, but what follows may be a clause, a phrase, or even just a word. The popular claim that the colon introduces a list isn’t always true, and certainly doesn’t cover all of its uses. For clarity, let’s separate the basic uses into three.

1. After an independent clause, the colon can be used to introduce a list.

   Example: We have several new items on the agenda: budgeting, personnel issues, new uniforms, and acquiring a new coffee machine.

2. A colon can also introduce a word, phrase, or clause that further explains something from the main clause, often answering an unstated question.

   Examples:
   There is only one way to improve your piano playing: practice.

   He realized he would have to make a decision: should he vote for the bill and risk assassination, or vote against it and face public ridicule?

   Here’s a good idea: let’s pick up some food on the way home from work.

3. When introducing quoted material, use a colon only if the introductory statement could be a complete sentence (similar to use No. 2) or if the quotation is so long that it will be an indented, block quotation.

   Example: The Chicago Manual of Style points out that the colon does have something in common with the semi-colon: “Between independent clauses, it functions much like a semi-colon” (p. 257).
**BUT**, don’t use a colon to introduce a quotation after a “saying” verb, such as “says,” “explains,” “commented,” or “noted.” Instead, use a comma.

**Example**: The style guide says, “The colon may be used instead of a period to introduce a series of related sentences.”

**Upper or lower case?** Style guides vary on this issue, but most recommend using a lower case letter after a colon. Some will suggest using a capital letter after a colon only if what follows could stand as a complete sentence.