

Punctuating with semicolons and colons

The **semicolon** and **colon** look similar; however, they have very different functions for punctuating sentences. A **semicolon** is written like this ; (a full stop above a comma) and a **colon** is written like this : (a full stop above a full stop). This factsheet will show the rules for:

1. using **semicolons**
2. using **colons**



GRAMMAR CHECKERS will NOT help you much with your **semicolons** and **colons**. It will NOT let you know if a **colon** is needed at all. Sometimes, you will see a green line to warn you that you may need a **semicolon** to avoid a run-on sentence, but you cannot rely on this. You will need to proofread your work and apply the rules for using **semicolons** and **colons** in your writing.

1. Using semicolons

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Semicolons have a number of functions in a sentence. If you use semicolons in your writing, **use them sparingly** and **apply the rules** correctly.

- ❖ **Rule 1:** Semicolons are used to separate main clauses which are closely related in content or theme. In this case, the semicolon is used to separate those parts of a sentence that need a stronger break than a comma, but are too close in meaning to use a full stop.

Examples

- ✓ My lecturer stopped me after the tutorial; she had something else to tell me.
- ✓ Few enrolling students know exactly what career their studies will offer them; most find their area of interest during their studies.

- ❖ **Rule 2: Semicolons** followed by commas are used before conjunctive adverbs and transitional phrases when you are using them to write a compound sentence (see also ASO fact sheet: Sentence types)

CONJUNCTIVE ADVERBS: e.g. *also, anyhow, next, anyway, incidentally, nonetheless, indeed, otherwise, similarly, still, then, furthermore, hence, besides, however, moreover, therefore, thus, nevertheless, consequently*

TRANSITIONAL PHRASES: e.g. *after all, as a matter of fact, as a result, at any rate, at the same time, even so, for example, for instance, in addition, in conclusion, in fact, in other words, in the first place, on the contrary, on the other hand, in the circumstance, of course*

Examples

- ✓ **Exams** measure student ability; however, not all students perform well in them.
- ✓ The ASO room at the Dixson Library is reserved for student consultations; after all, students are entitled to ask questions about their academic skills in privacy.

- ❖ **Rule 3: Semicolons** separate complex items in a list that already have commas. You will need to use a semicolon before the last 'and'.

Example

- ✓ At the University of New England there are ten Schools: Arts; Behavioural, Cognitive and Social Sciences; Humanities; Environmental and Rural Science; Science and Technology; Business, Economics and Public Policy; Law; Education; and Rural Medicine and Health.

- ❖ **Rule 4: Semicolons** separate in-text references in the Harvard system when you are citing more than one item. Authors' names are presented alphabetically.

Example

(Atkinson 2007; GrammarTime n.d.; Jackson & Brown 1998; Strongman et al. 2003)

2. Using colons

Colons have a number of functions in a sentence. If you use colons in your writing, use them sparingly, and never use a colon more than once in any sentence.

- ❖ **Rule 1: Colons** can be used to introduce a list, **BUT** they must follow a complete sentence (independent clause).

Examples

- ✗ The nine elements of a formal report are: title page, abstract, table of contents, introduction, body, conclusions, recommendations, references and appendix/appendices.
(INCOMPLETE SENTENCE BEFORE THE COLON)
- ✓ A formal report includes nine elements: title page, abstract, table of contents, introduction, body, conclusions, recommendations, references and appendix/appendices.
(COMPLETE SENTENCE BEFORE THE COLON)

- ❖ **Rule 2: Colons** can be used to explain, summarise or extend the meaning in a sentence by introducing a word, phrase or clause that enlarges on the previous statement.

Examples

- ✓ Students generally use one word for describing their feelings about learning how to use written English correctly: **empowering**. (WORD)
- ✓ Learning correct English can take some time if you do not have a learning background in English rules: **at least six months for many students**. (PHRASE)
- ✓ The increase in student numbers is understandable: **the university is offering extra help for students with their essay writing skills**. (CLAUSE)

- ❖ **Rule 3: Colons** are used to separate the title from the subtitle.

Example

- ✓ Writing for university: a student guide to successful essays
- ✓ Writing for university: **A** student guide to successful essays
(YOU CAN CHOOSE TO USE UPPER OR LOWER CASE AFTER THE COLON, BUT BE CONSISTENT)

- ❖ **Rule 4: Colons** can be used to introduce a quotation in formal academic writing.

Examples

- ✓ (long quotation) Writing and marking essays are time-consuming and expensive processes that require careful consideration:

In most courses, assignments are set throughout the semester. They take considerable staff time and resources to mark and time and effort for students to prepare. It is well worth the time for lecturers to research alternative assessment methods, such as online quizzes, to lessen the marking load and provide a more balanced approach to tertiary assessment. (Smith 2008:12)

Because universities have diminishing budgets, it is important that alternative assessment strategies are investigated.

- ✓ (short quotation) In her research with student writing, Smythe (2004:37) finds: 'Many students benefit from academic writing programs that involve their own assignment tasks'
- ✗ **BUT**, if you use the word 'that' **DO NOT** use a colon to introduce your quotation e.g. Smythe (2004:37) finds **that** 'Many students benefit ...'

- ❖ **Rule 5:** In the Author-date system of referencing, **colons** are used to separate year of publication and page number when when you write an in-text reference for

Examples

- ✓ 'Critical thinking is highly valued but difficult to teach effectively' (Gelder 2001:539).

(NOTE THAT THERE IS NO SPACE AFTER THE COLON)