Special Punctuation
Colons, Semicolons and Dashes

This handout explains the common uses of three types of tricky, but useful, punctuation marks: colons (:), semicolons (;), and dashes (‒). When used properly, these punctuation marks can add spice to your writing and clarify your meaning.

Colon (:)

Colons follow independent clauses (clauses that could stand alone as sentences) and can be used to present an explanation, list a definition, draw attention to something, or join ideas together.

Use a colon to...

- Announce, introduce, or direct attention to a list, a noun or noun phrase, a quotation, or an example/explanation.
  - List/Series
    - Example: We covered many of the fundamentals in our writing class: grammar, punctuation, and voice.
  - Noun/Noun phrase
    - Example: My boyfriend regularly provided me the things I needed most: wine and chocolate.
  - Example/Explanation
    - Example: Many graduate students discover that there is a dark side to academia: late nights, high stress, and a crippling addiction to caffeinated beverages.

- Join sentences. Use a colon to join two sentences when the second sentence summarizes, clarifies, or explains the first. They should both be complete sentences (independent clauses) and their content must be closely related.
  - Example: Road construction in Melbourne has hindered travel around town: parts of US 192, Babcock Road, and University Boulevard are closed during the construction.

- Express clock time, separate titles from subtitles, and as part of other writing conventions
  - Separate units of time
    - Example: 12:00 p.m.
  - Separate titles from subtitles in Reference and Works Cited entries (example in APA formatting, but the rule applies to all formatting styles)
  - After a salutation in a formal business letter
    - Example: To Whom It May Concern:

Common Colon Mistakes:

- Using a colon between a verb and its object or complement—if a period can’t be used, neither can a colon.
  - Incorrect: The very best oranges are: those that are grown in the great state of Florida.

- Using a colon between a preposition and its object
  - Incorrect: My favorite cake is made of: chocolate, flour, butter, eggs, and chocolate icing.

- Using a colon after “such as,” “including,” “especially,” and similar phrases. This violates the rule that the preceding material must be a complete thought.
  - Incorrect: There are many different types of dogs, such as: Labradors, poodles and cocker spaniels.
Semicolon (;)

A semicolon looks like a comma with a period above it, which is no accident. Semicolons create more separation between two sentence components than a comma but less than a period. Semicolons can separate or join sentence components.

Use a semicolon to...

- **Separate items in a list, when some of those items already contain commas.**
  
  **Example:** Suppose I want to list three items I bought at the grocery store. A sentence listing these items might look like this: *I bought apples, oranges, and bananas at the grocery store.*

  Now I want to describe these items with phrases that include commas:
  
  - *shiny, ripe apples*
  - *bright, juicy oranges*
  - *firm, yellow bananas*

  Using a comma to put these phrases into a sentence looks something like this mess: *I bought shiny, ripe apples, bright, juicy oranges, and firm, yellow bananas at the grocery store.*

  Change those commas which separate the list of items to semicolons and your readers will know which words apply to what fruits: *I bought shiny, ripe apples; bright, juicy oranges; and firm, yellow bananas at the grocery store.*

- **Join two sentences (independent clauses) together.** Semi-colons keep the clauses somewhat separate, like a period would do, so you can easily tell which ideas belong to which clause. It also suggests that there may be a close relationship between the two clauses—closer than you would expect if there were a period between them.

  - Connect two independent clauses (complete sentences)
    **Example:** The children played; the parents chatted.
  
  - Connect two independent clauses with certain phrases (e.g., also, however, therefore)
    **Example:** She spoke too quickly; therefore, her friend on the other end of the phone could not understand her.
  
  - Connect two complex independent clauses (complete sentences with commas)
    **Example:** Even though you are angry with her, she still wants to talk to you; if you insult her, she will leave.

**Common Semi-Colon Mistakes:**

- **Using a semi-colon where a comma is needed in a simple list**
  
  **Incorrect:** The book; lamp; and table made up a welcoming reading corner.
  
  **Correct:** The book, lamp, and table made up a welcoming reading corner.

- **Using a comma where a semi-colon is needed in a complex list**
  
  **Incorrect:** The jury included Ralph, a carpenter, Renee, a teacher, and Paul, a doctoral student.
  
  **Correct:** The jury included Ralph, a carpenter; Renee, a teacher; and Paul, a doctoral student.

- **Using a semi-colon to join a complete sentence (independent clause) to an incomplete sentence (dependent clause)**
  
  **Incorrect:** Since the diner was packed with waiting customers [incomplete]; Edna handed out free cups of coffee to keep everyone happy [complete].
  
  **Correct:** The diner was packed with waiting customers [complete]; Edna handed out free cups of coffee to keep everyone happy [complete].
**Dash (—)**

A dash provides an opportunity to incorporate “extra” information or explanation into sentences. Dashes are often used to offset non-essential information in order to make it stand out to catch the reader’s attention.

**Use a dash to...**

- Set off material for emphasis **Dashes add drama, drawing the reader’s attention to the information between them.**
  - **Example:** After eighty years of daydreaming, the elderly woman finally decided it was time to revisit the land of her youth—Spain.
  - **Example:** “Dexter”—a harmless television drama or a dangerously subversive guide to getting away with murder?
- Two dashes can emphasize material in the middle of a sentence. Some grammar guides even allow a full sentence between the dashes (see second example).
  - **Example:** Though Sean’s jeans were sprayed with venom—and bore two fang holes—he had not been poisoned.
  - **Example:** The students—they were each over eighteen—lined up in the streets to vote for the presidential candidates.
- Two dashes can emphasize a modifier (words or phrases that describe a noun).
  - **Example:** The playground—cold and snow-covered in the winter months—was deserted.
  - **Example:** Emma—her curly hair frizzing—walked out into the Florida humidity.
- Indicate sentence introductions or conclusions. Use a dash to show readers that certain words are meant as introductions or conclusions to your sentence.
  - **Example:** Hiking boots, mosquito repellant, long socks—these are essential items for our camping trip.
  - **Example:** To improve their grades, students should closely examine their study habits—time management, note taking, and working without distraction.
- Mark “bonus phrases.” Phrases that add information or clarify but are not necessary to the meaning of a sentence are ordinarily set off with commas. But when the sentence itself already contains one or more comma, dashes can help readers better understand the sentence.
  - **Confusing Comma Example:** Even simple tasks, opening a jar, brushing my teeth, and turning a door knob, became impossible with my arthritis.
  - **Better Dashes Example:** Even simple tasks—opening a jar, brushing my teeth, and turning a door knob—became impossible with my arthritis.
- Break up dialogue. In written dialogue, if a speaker suddenly or abruptly stops speaking, hesitates in speech, or is cut off by another speaker, a dash can indicate the pause or interruption.
  - **Example:** “I—I don’t recall making that statement,” denied the crooked politician.
  - **Example:** Alexys began to explain herself saying, “But I was only trying to—” “I don’t care what you were trying to do,” Ryan interrupted.

**Common Dash Mistakes:**

- Placing a dash in the wrong part of speech, i.e., between essential elements.
  - **Incorrect:** Annie went—to make copies.
- Overusing dashes in the same sentence.
  - **Incorrect:** Diana needed soda—chips—cookies—and salsa to make this party a hit.