Uses of the Colon and Semi-Colon  

(Also see Rules for Writers 8th ed. 313-18.)

The main use of the **colon** is to connect one grammatically complete statement to something that expands on something in that statement, by giving examples, evidence, or more specific information. What follows the colon can be

- **A list**
  Several American writers have died young without completing the work they had started: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Nathaniel West, and James Agee.

- **A phrase**
  Take from a miser all that he has, and he still has one thing left: his miserliness.

- **A clause**
  All the evidence points to the same conclusion: that the defendant is innocent.

- **A grammatically complete statement (independent clause)**
  Although the experience was unpleasant, I learned from it: I will never make that mistake again.

  The defendant says he was home all evening, but he’s lying: I saw him at the gas station at about 9 pm.

Note that there must be an independent clause **before** the colon. Interrupting a sentence with a colon before it is complete is a typical error.

Incorrect: Examples of such writers are: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Nathaniel West, and James Agee.

Correct: Examples of such writers are F. Scott Fitzgerald, Nathaniel West, and James Agee.

The element that follows the colon, on the other hand, doesn’t have to be able to stand on its own, although it may be.

The main use of the **semi-colon** is to join two grammatically complete statements that are closely related, representing two parts of one complicated thought. Any time you could start a new sentence **grammatically**, but don’t want to because the **thought** is not really complete, a semi-colon may be a good option.

  I am not angry; I am only disappointed.
Here is a good description of the function of the semi-colon from science essayist Lewis Thomas:

The semicolon tells you that there is still some question about the preceding full sentence; something else needs to be added. . . . The period tells you that that is that; if you didn’t get all the meaning you wanted or expected, anyway you got all the writer intended to parcel out and now you have to move along. But with the semicolon there you get a pleasant feeling of expectancy; there is more to come; read on; it will get clearer.


One common use of the semi-colon is to connect ideas that are **contrasting**.

Introverts are not necessarily shy. Shy people are anxious or frightened or self-excoriating in social settings; introverts generally are not.

Another good candidate for a semi-colon is a sentence that points out things that are **parallel** or **symmetrical**:

The left half of the brain controls the right side of the body; the right half of the brain controls the left side.

A semi-colon can used to combine sentences when the second one begins with a word like *however*, *thus*, and *therefore* or a phrase like *on the other hand*—situations where a comma is not sufficient.

I love you; however, I don’t trust you.

Note that there must be a viable sentence—a grammatically complete statement—on both sides of the semi-colon; otherwise, there will be a fragment.

Another use of the **semi-colon** is to separate items in a list (which would ordinarily be separated by commas) when those items are long or complicated or have commas within them.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.