

colons : : : : : : : :

and semicolons ; ; ; ; ;

within sentences

For use with *Technical Editing*, 3rd ed.

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- This presentation distinguishes colons from semicolons so that you can use them accurately in sentences.
 - The presentation reviews both grammatical and stylistic reasons for choosing colons or semicolons.

A basic principle of comprehension

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- In order to comprehend, readers need to see relationships. When punctuation separates parts that readers must comprehend as related, the punctuation interferes with comprehension.

Application (bad examples)

- **Do not** use punctuation to separate parts of sentences that belong together.

- *subject and verb*

The manual, includes four chapters.



- *verb and object*

The manual includes: four chapters.



- *preposition and object*

The manual includes helpful topics, such as: page layout, color, and typography.



Separating what should be connected

- The manual, includes four chapters.
- The manual includes: four chapters.
- The manual includes helpful topics, such as: page layout, color, and typography.



Such punctuation contributes nothing to comprehension and probably interferes.

Sample sentences

Do not use a colon between the **verb and object** or between **preposition and object**.

Ineffective



- Citizenship requires: honesty and respect.
colon separates verb "requires" from object.
- Use a title such as: Dr., Mrs., or Mr.
colon separates preposition "as" from object.

Using the colon correctly

Use a colon in a sentence before an embedded list only if the whole phrase or clause before the colon is complete (s-v-o).

Effective (the object precedes the colon; the thought is complete)

subject **verb** **object**

Research emphasizes three areas: stabilizing,
improving, and upgrading.



Using colons grammatically



Connect parts of sentences that belong together.

Don't separate these parts with punctuation

- subject-verb

- verb-direct object

- preposition-object

Using colons stylistically



Colons and semicolons are often (not always) interchangeable grammatically, but they communicate different meanings.

Choosing one or the other shapes a reader's response.

What a colon means



The colon communicates *expectation*.
It signals a reader to look for additional
clarifying information.

Colon signals expectation



The product designers stated three goals:

[the reader wonders: what three goals?]

Our new model has great promise: in independent tests, it was faster than competing models.

[at the colon, the reader wonders: what is the promise? what is the evidence?]

When to use a colon

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- Use a colon when you could insert “namely” at the point of punctuation.
 - Use a colon when the second clause is more specific than the first clause.
 - The product designers stated three goals: [namely,...]
 - Our new model has great promise: [namely,...]

What a semicolon means

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- The semicolon communicates *balance*.
 - It links clauses that are closely related in meaning but about equal in importance.
 - Test A measured seek time; Test B measured access time.

When to use a semicolon

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- Use a semicolon in compound sentences when there is no coordinating conjunction.
 - Some editors work best on hard copy; other editors prefer to work online.

When to use a semicolon

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- *Sometimes* use a semicolon in a complex series when some items in the series use commas.
 - The technical communicator needs subject-matter knowledge; skills with software and hardware; and ability to research, organize, and display information.

Summary: Grammar

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- Use punctuation to show relationships.
 - Punctuation that separates things that belong together (such as subject and verb, preposition and object) interferes with comprehension.



Summary: Style

- Colon -- expectation
- Semicolon – balance



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