

Colons and Semicolons: A User's Guide

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Colon



Semicolon

Colons and semicolons are two very useful but misunderstood items of punctuation. They can help us make sense of a sentence; they can help us say more in a sentence; they can display the chronological order of a series of events; they can help us prompt, rewind or change direction.

A colon is a prompt, signpost, entrance, even a steep ledge; a prompt which can be used in a number of ways, including: an introduction to something such as a quotation or a list, or the expansion of a statement (eg. "...in a number of ways, including:" where the colon acts as a doorway to precise detail).

Just as we can use a colon as a prompt at the start of a list, so we can use a semicolon to separate the individual items or points in that list. The *Oxford Encyclopedic Dictionary* describes a semicolon as "*a punctuation mark of intermediate value between a comma and a full stop [period].*" It is often used to detail two or more events happening at the same time (concurrently), whereas a full stop (period) or comma may suggest these events happen one after another (consecutively) and in the order they are written.

When used in sentences, semicolons are very useful for separating individual statements, especially when you have more than one thing to say in each statement. For example:

"There are three people in the boat: the captain, a good person but always drunk; the first mate, too young to be at sea, rescued from a solitary lifeboat found sinking slowly in the dead of night; and a terrible cook who can read the stars, catch fish, and tell wonderful tales of adventure at sea."

In this example, the characters are kept separate from one another by semicolons, enabling the author to say more than one thing about each of them.

The use of semicolons also enables us to use commas in each statement without confusing the reader. If we used only commas, without any semicolons, it would be easy for the reader to get confused. Imagine if we wrote:

"There are three people in the boat: the captain, a good person but always drunk, the first mate, too young to be at sea, rescued from a solitary lifeboat found sinking slowly in the dead of night, and a terrible cook, who can read the stars, catch fish, and tell wonderful tales of adventures at sea."

In this version, the reader cannot be absolutely certain who is “a good person but always drunk” (the captain, the first mate, or is the “good person” a third character?), or who was “too young to be at sea” (the first mate or the terrible cook?), or if there was a third person at all (the captain could be the “good person” and the first mate could be the “terrible cook” leaving us with only two people in the boat). It can also read as if there were four people in the boat.

Colons and semicolons can be used in partnership or independently (ie. they’re not always reliant upon each other).

Here are two parts of a statement:

*“Get back to my main task”
“writing.”*

They can be joined into one statement in a number of ways, including the use of a colon or a semicolon.

“Get back to my main task: writing.”

Here, the two parts are joined using a colon. The colon acts as a prompt for the reader, informing them they are about to be told what the main task is. In this way, the colon helps to unravel a general statement and provide precise detail. Consider the game Pass the Parcel. A colon is the equivalent of the music stopping, at which point the person holding the parcel knows immediately to unwrap a layer to reveal more than was known before.

“Get back to my main task; writing.”

Here, the two parts are joined using a semicolon. Colons can be very direct, semicolons can be repetitive. In the previous example the colon prompted us to stop, consider, reveal. Here, the semicolon is directing us back over what we have already read. It is stating (without us having to actually read it as such), “Get back to my main task; get back to writing.” It is telling us, through default, the main task is writing. Whereas the colon put the emphasis on telling us what the main task is (writing), the semicolon is putting the emphasis on it being the main task.

In clubbing parlance: a colon is punctuation’s equivalent of a spotlight, whereas the semicolon is punctuation’s equivalent of the crowd shouting “rewind”. A semicolon can take us back to the top of the sentence so we can vary the ending, but in doing so saves us having to repeat ourselves; saves us having to use so many words. It can also alter the musical dynamic of the sentence, allowing the author more options, opportunities and interpretations than may first have been imagined.

We can use punctuation to reduce the word-count. With the example “Get back to my main task; get back to writing” why should we repeat the words “get back to” when there’s no need? If we did this all the time our writing would be cumbersome and overly wordy. Punctuation, when used correctly, can replace words and make our writing more efficient. Punctuation can enable us to alter the tone of our text; more accurately reflect the intonations we use when we speak; reflect the speed at which our text should be read. Without an understanding of how punctuation works, these options are lost or more difficult to achieve.

A third example:

“Both variations are correct; neither is wrong.”

Here, two statements made up of differing words are combined into one sentence. They are joined (and separated) by a semicolon because both statements are fundamentally stating the same thing, just in different ways; the second statement doesn’t significantly alter the first. The statements are operating concurrently, adding layers of meaning, music or effect.

A final example, this time from *The Big Nowhere* by James Ellroy:

“The girl swallowed her gum and walked in front of them. Dudley smiled; Mal thought: he’s a spellbinder — don’t let him run the show.”

Here, Ellroy has used a semicolon *and* a colon in close proximity to one another but they are operating independently of each other. The semicolon between “*Dudley smiled*” and “*Mal thought*” tells us these two events happened concurrently. The colon after “*Mal thought*” is operating as a prompt, and after this prompt we are told what Mal thought. That’s exactly what Ellroy does, he tells us what Dudley is doing then tells us what Mal is thinking while Dudley is doing it. Simple.

Hopefully these examples will help you choose when to use a colon, semicolon, dash, full stop or comma. Also, how your choice may affect how a text is read.

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