The Colon

The colon is like the maître d' of the punctuation world: the first part of your sentence must be an independent clause that tells your reader, "I'm about to share some information with you." The colon tells your reader, "It's right this way."

The colon has two main uses in a sentence: to introduce a list, statement or phrase, and to connect two thoughts.

When to use a colon

Used with a list

We needed three things from the store: milk, oranges and rice.

Used with a statement

They gave the new employees a stern warning: Never allow visitors to feed the animals.

Used with a phrase

There was one place she always avoided: the smoking area.

Notice that the first part of each sentence above could stand alone as a complete sentence. In other words, the part before the colon is an independent clause.

When to not use a colon

A common mistake writers make with colons is to use one within a sentence where there is no break in the grammar. Remember that not all lists should have a colon before them.

Here are some common errors.

Don't use a colon after a *be* verb such as is, are, was, or were.

George's favorite actors are: Samuel L. Jackson, Mel Gibson, and Harrison Ford.

Don't use a colon after *such as* or *including*.

She is allergic to animals, including: dogs, cats, and horses.

Don't use a colon after *for instance* or *for example*.

The children have many talents. For example: they can both sing, and they're good at math.

Use a colon to connect two thoughts

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A colon can be used to connect two related thoughts. When you use a colon this way, the second thought should explain or clarify the first.

She is a biologist: she studies living things.

Air traffic controllers need to keep their minds focused: they have hundreds of lives in their hands.

Use a colon to introduce a quotation

A colon can also be used to introduce a quotation if the sentence before the quotation is complete.

Correct

Consider the words of President Kennedy: "Liberty without learning is always in peril and learning without liberty is always in vain."

Incorrect

According to Benjamin Franklin: "There never was a good war or a bad peace."

To correct this sentence, use a comma instead of a colon.

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Contributors: D. Spelke; K. Larson; A. Linden;