

## The Colon

You might be surprised to learn that the colon is one of the most helpful and easiest to use of all the punctuation marks. You don't need to remember six or seven rules to understand how a colon works. In prose, a colon really does only one thing: it *introduces*. It can introduce just about anything: a word, a phrase, a sentence, a quotation, or a list. You'll notice that we've used colons in the two preceding sentences to introduce a sentence, in the first case, and a list, in the second case. This is how simple the colon is. Let's look at some other examples:

**Joe has only one thing on his mind: profit.**  
**Joe has only one thing on his mind: his stock portfolio.**  
**Joe has only one thing on his mind: he wants to get rich.**  
**Joe has three things on his mind: stocks, bonds, and certificates of deposit.**

We have used a colon in these four sentences to introduce various kinds of things: a word, a phrase, a sentence, and a list. You can use a colon in your prose in any place where you must directly introduce something. A colon gives special emphasis to whatever you're introducing because readers must first come to a stop, and so they pay more attention to it. For example, let's say you are writing a letter describing a product, and you want to emphasize above all that this product, the Jacobsen lawn mower, is reliable. You could well write:

**The Jacobsen lawn mower beats its competitors especially in the key area of reliability.**

While this sentence gets the point across, it doesn't place much emphasis on reliability. A sentence using a colon is much more emphatic:

**The Jacobsen lawn mower beats its competitors especially in one key area: reliability.**

Notice that the second example places clear emphasis on the point that the writer is trying to communicate to his or her reader: that the Jacobsen lawn mower is above all reliable. The writer of this sentence has used the colon effectively.

Perhaps the most common way to use a colon is to introduce a list of items, as in this sentence:

**This report reviews five main criteria to determine whether to purchase the IBM PC: hardware, software, maintenance, service and customer support.**

If you aren't sure whether you need a colon in a particular sentence, here is a handy test: read the sentence, and when you reach the colon, substitute the word *namely*; if the sentence reads through smoothly, then there's a good chance that you do need a colon. For example, you can read any of the example sentences above with the word *namely* in the place of the colon:

**Joe has only one thing on his mind [namely] profit.**  
**Joe has only one thing on his mind [namely] his stock portfolio.**  
**Joe has only one thing on his mind [namely] he wants to get rich.**  
**Joe has three things on his mind [namely] stocks, bonds, and certificates of deposit.**

This test may not work 100 percent of the time, but it is a fairly reliable indicator of whether you need a colon.

One word of caution: do not place the colon after the verb in a sentence, even when you are introducing something, because the verb itself introduces and the colon would be redundant. For example, you would not write:

**My three favorite friends are: Evelyn, Marlyne, and Ronni.**

The colon is not necessary in the sentence above because the verb does the work of introducing the three friends. You can check this sentence by using the test we just mentioned. It would seem awkward to read this sentence, "My three favorite friends are, namely, Evelyn, Marlyne, and Ronni." The fact that the sentence is awkward when you read it with *namely* is an indication that the colon is unnecessary. Remember, the colon shows emphasis and, therefore, you *want* the reader to stop at the colon before proceeding on to whatever it is you are introducing.

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## The Semicolon

The semicolon is another important tool you can use when you write. There are two ways to use this punctuation mark: *as a connector between two sentences* and *as a supercomma*.

### 1) To Connect Two Sentences

The semicolon is most often used to connect two sentences. Obviously, the sentences ought to be relatively close in content, but other than that you can connect any two sentences with a semicolon. The diagram below may help you remember this usage:

## SENTENCE;SENTENCE

As a communicator, you are always putting together complex items in your prose and showing how they relate to one another. A semicolon is an economical way to join two sentences, and therefore two ideas, so that your reader sees the relationship. For example, you may write any of the following sentences:

**Jim is a good typist; he makes few mistakes.**

**The AFC Corporation is an excellent company to invest in; its investments have risen sharply and steadily over each of the last ten years.**

**Ms. Sanchez is a successful real estate salesperson; however, she was unable to sell her own house.**

Each of the three examples above contains two sentences glued together by a semicolon. The second part of each sentence makes a comment on the first. Certainly, each sentence could be written as two sentences, but you wouldn't be expressing the close relationship between the two parts that you do when you use a semicolon. With two separate sentences, the reader must stop at the period of the first sentence and then begin to read the second; with two sentences connected by a semicolon, the reader does not have to come to a full stop and, therefore, the relationship seems that much closer. Also, this type of sentence allows you to express your ideas economically.

The important point to remember is that you must have a complete sentence on both sides of the semicolon. If your second sentence begins with a conjunction (*and, but, or, etc.*), you do not need a semicolon because the conjunction and the comma that usually goes with it are equivalent to a semicolon. Instead, combine *two full sentences* with the semicolon.

Sometimes a sentence may begin with words like *however, therefore, and nevertheless*. If your second sentence begins with one of these words, and if it is indeed a full sentence, you still must use a semicolon to connect the two. The sentence about Ms. Sanchez illustrates this use.

A word of caution: never glue two sentences together with only a comma. Grammarians call this sentence error a comma splice. Here is an example of two sentences connected with only a comma:

The banking community became quite upset at the rise in the prime rate, bankers felt that they would ultimately lose a considerable amount of money.

A comma splice is considered ungrammatical because the reader begins reading the second sentence before realizing that the first sentence is completed. Readers are used to stopping at the end of a sentence, and they become disoriented when they find that they have unknowingly left one sentence and entered a new one. This is why effective writers avoid the comma splice. Here are two additional examples of comma splices:

**Ms. Liccini is a fine worker, she meets all her deadlines.**

**Our sales have increased by twenty percent, our inventory has been reduced by thirty percent.**

Each of the examples above constitutes two sentences glued together with a comma. You can correct a comma splice by inserting a semicolon between the two sentences, by adding a comma to your conjunction, or, of course, by punctuating them as two sentences. Whichever way you choose, however, you must make sure your final drafts do not contain comma splices.

There is one instance in which a comma splice is considered acceptable. Occasionally, you may have a *list of items that could stand alone as full sentences*. You may use commas to attach these items *so long as it is clear to the reader that this is a list of relatively equal items*. Here is an example:

**I opened the safe door, I took out the money pouch, and I concealed it in my desk.**

The example above shows a list of three items and illustrates a step-by-step process. Even though the items all constitute full sentences, it is acceptable to use commas to attach them but only because they are members of a larger list. If you are unsure about using commas to connect sentences in a list, perhaps it is best to rewrite the sentence. Do, however, stay alert for any two sentences in your prose that are connected by only a comma.

Related to the comma splice is the run-on sentence. Run-on sentences, often called “fused” sentences, are two sentences punctuated as if they were one. In other words, a run-on is a comma splice without the comma—two sentences smashed together with no punctuation between them. Here are two sample run-ons:

**Chu Lic is the foreman Joseph Garcia is the line boss.**

**I knew that the new personnel policy would cause problems the union is reacting quite vehemently.**

As you can see, each of the two samples above is composed of two sentences. The writer should have connected the sentences with a semicolon or punctuated them as separate sentences. Again, you don't have to worry about such matters until the proofreading stage, but you must make sure your final draft doesn't contain run-on sentences.

## **2) As Supercomma**

As you know, you normally separate the members of a list with commas, as in this sentence:

**I have just bought shares in IBM, USAG, and ITT.**

The commas let the reader know where one item ends and the next begins. Sometimes, however, you have a list of complex items and one (or more) of the items already contains a comma. In such a case, the reader is likely to get confused about what is really a member of the list and what is not. You can avoid this confusion by making the semicolon a sort of “supercomma.” Look at the sentence below to see how the supercomma works.

**Suncom Corporation has subsidiaries in four cities: New York, New York, Wilmington, Ohio, Houston, Texas, and San Francisco, California.**

This sentence contains so many commas, both between the members of the list and within them, that readers are likely to become confused. Instead, you can make the semicolon a supercomma between each of the members so that your meaning is clear:

**Suncom Corporation has subsidiaries in four cities: New York, New York; Wilmington, Ohio; Houston, Texas; and San Francisco, California.**

The second sentence is clearer than the first because the reader knows exactly where members of the list begin and end. You probably will not need to use a semicolon as a supercomma often, but if your sentence contains a list of items, one (or more) of which already contains a comma, you can clarify your meaning by using the supercomma.

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## **The Comma**

The comma tells the reader to pause, just as the blinking yellow light tells a driver to slow down and proceed with caution. Some writers can tell where a comma is needed by reading their prose aloud and inserting a comma where there seems to be a clear pause in the sentence. This may work much of the time *if you read the sentence carefully and accurately*. However, this procedure is not the most precise way to approach comma usage. Below are four general ways to use commas with a reasonable degree of certainty.

### **1) Between Items in a Series**

When you are listing three or more items in a sentence, simply place a comma between each member of the list. Here are two examples:

**Mr. Sanchez used the money that he won from the sweepstakes to buy a house, a car, and a small yacht.**

**We will purchase the stock if the price is lowered to \$30 per share, if we are allowed to buy a block of over 10,000 shares, and if we receive a guarantee that no new shares will be created in the next fiscal year.**

The commas above clearly mark where one member of the list leaves off and the next one begins. There is no mystery in how to use the comma in these kinds of sentences. What is often unclear, however, is whether to include the comma between the last and second-to-last items in a list. In the past, it was considered improper to omit the final comma in a series, but modern writers believe that the conjunction (*and, but, or*) does the same thing as a comma: it marks the place between two items in the set. These writers have argued that a sentence is more economical without an unneeded comma. As a result, you now have the *option* to choose whether to include the final comma.

Nevertheless, many people still follow the old rule and expect to see the final comma. Also, if your list is rather complex, omitting the comma may confuse the reader about where the second-to-last item leaves off and the last item begins. In this case, of course, you would want to include the comma in order to avoid confusion. Perhaps it is best to get into the habit of always using the comma between the last two items in order to avoid all controversy. You do, however, have the option to omit it.

### **2) Between Two Sentence**

You'll remember that a semicolon is used to connect two sentences. However, more often we glue two sentences together with a comma and conjunction (such as *and* or *but*). In fact, if you examine a document you have written recently, you are likely to find many such sentences; they're so common that you don't even realize you are writing them. When you do put two sentences together with a conjunction, you must also include a comma. That is, the conjunction and comma are equivalent to a semicolon when you're connecting sentences. Here are three examples:

**The Suncom Corporation has just acquired the OILCO company, *and* it has agreed to sell OILCO's oil-drilling rights in Texas as soon as possible.**

**I knew that the price of IBM stock would increase after it entered the home computer market, *but* I had no idea that the price would skyrocket.**

**I first conducted a thorough audit of the company, *and* then I interviewed the manager to try to determine how much money was missing.**

Each sentence above is made up of two sentences glued together with a comma and conjunction. For example, the first sentence is made up of the following:

**The Suncom Corporation has just acquired the OILCO company.**

**It has agreed to sell OILCO's drilling rights in Texas as soon as possible.**

All you need to remember is this: when you're connecting two sentences with a conjunction, you must also include a comma because the conjunction and comma work together as a team. Perhaps this diagram will help you remember:

**SENTENCE, conj. SENTENCE**

Often you may use a conjunction but not have a complete sentence on both sides of it. In this case you do not need a comma. For example, you could easily rewrite the above sentences so that one part of each sentence is not a full sentence:

**The Suncom Corporation has just acquired the OILCO company *and* has agreed to sell OILCO's oil-drilling rights in Texas as soon as possible.**

**I knew that the price of IBM stock would increase after it entered the home computer market *but* had no idea that the price would skyrocket.**

**I first conducted a thorough audit of the company *and* then interviewed the manager to try to determine how much money was missing.**

Because in the above examples you do not have full sentences on both sides of the conjunction, there's no need to include a comma.

One last bit of advice: if your sentence is *very* short (perhaps 5 to 10 words), you do have the option of omitting the comma if you wish. You have this option because your reader can usually understand a short sentence more readily than a long one, and therefore you would not need a comma for readability. Here is an example:

**Mr. Santana is old and he is wise.**

This sentence is so short that you may omit the comma. Remember, punctuation is meant to help the writer and the reader, not to make their job more difficult. That's why you may opt to omit the comma.

You don't need to memorize seven or eight rules naming each of the different structures you can add to your sentence. Instead, remember that when you add information to the front or back of a sentence, you will want to alert your readers in order to help them clearly understand your message. Here are four examples:

**Certainly, Joan is a successful salesperson.**

**Although she flunked chemistry and barely passed math, Joan is a good student.**

**In order to help save the company from bankruptcy, we sold shares in the company at discount prices.**

**Joan is a good student, although she flunked chemistry and barely passed math.**

If you examine the sentences above, you will see where the writer has attached words to the front or back of each core sentence. Even when you add one word such as *certainly* in the first example, you want your reader to know where the real sentence begins. This is why you place the comma there. If you read the sentence carefully, you'll also notice a natural pause where the comma is situated.

#### **4) On Both Sides of a Nonessential Component**

The three uses of the comma just discussed are quite easy. You should be able to tell when those commas are needed or not. When you are proofreading your own prose, it will be clear to you whether you have a list of items or not, whether you're attaching two sentences with a conjunction or not, and whether you are tacking words onto the front or back of your sentence or not. The fourth use of the comma, however, is a little more complex because you must make a judgement call. Nevertheless, even this fourth way to use a comma is relatively simple.

Often, you will inset a group of words into the middle of a sentence. Sometimes this group of words will need to be set off by commas from the rest of the sentence, and sometimes you will not need commas. In order to tell whether you need commas, you must make a judgment about whether the added words are essential to the meaning of the sentence or whether they simply provide extra detail. Let's use an analogy to illustrate this concept. The modern stereo system is what we call a component system in that it is made of up many different components: an amplifier, receiver, CD player, tape deck, and various speakers. With most stereo systems, you have the option of removing certain components and adding new ones. For example, you may decide to unplug your tape deck but retain the CD player. These various components are optional or *nonessential* to the system itself. Similarly, you often add or delete components from your sentences. If a component (a group of words in this case) is added to a sentence but does not affect the *meaning* of the sentence when it is removed, then that component is not essential.

In order to tell a reader that a group of words is a nonessential component, you place commas in front and in back of the group of words. However, if omitting the group of words would drastically change the meaning of the sentence, then those words are *not* a component; rather, they are *essential* to the meaning of the sentence. In that case, you would not want to put commas on either side of the component so that the reader knows that those words are absolutely important to the meaning of the sentence. For example, look carefully at the following sentences:

**Mr. Johnson, who is the company president, will present the award at our annual dinner.**

**Banks which hold over a billion dollars in assets are rare.**

In the first sentence, the information about Johnson being the company president has no bearing on the main idea of the sentence: that she will present the award at the annual dinner. Since this information is added or *extra*, we let the reader know it is an interchangeable component (like the stereo's tape deck) by placing commas on either side of it. In contrast, the second sentence contains information that is absolutely essential to the meaning of the sentence: "which hold over a billion dollars in assets." If you were to place commas around these words, you would be erroneously telling the reader that the words constitute a nonessential component. For example, look at this sentence:

**Banks, which hold over a billion dollars in assets, are rare.**

This sentence tells the reader that the main idea is that "banks are rare." Certainly, banks are far from rare, but by enclosing the information in commas you have said that they are.

Although we've spent some time discussing this use of the comma, it isn't very difficult to master. Simply remember that when you are proofreading you should check your sentences for essential and nonessential components.

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## **The Dash**

The dash—often typed as two hyphens side by side with no space between the dash and the words on either side of it—is used to connect groups of words to other groups. Generally, the dash does this in two ways: it separates words in the middle of a sentence from the rest of the sentence, or it leads to material at the end of a sentence.

### **1) Separating Words in the Middle of the Sentence**

As described in our section on commas, writers often place a component in a sentence and set the component off with commas. Sometimes, however, you might wish to place special emphasis on the component, but commas are too weak to serve this purpose. If this is the case, you may wish to use dashes for added emphasis. For example, look at these two pairs of sentences:

- 1. Linda Simpson, the president's most trusted economic advisor, will resign her office during today's press conference.**
- 2. Linda Simpson—the president's most trusted economic advisor—will resign her office during today's press conference.**
- 3. Simpson's prescription for the economy, lower interest rates, higher employment, and less government spending, was rejected by the president's administration.**
- 4. Simpson's prescription for the economy—lower interest rates, higher employment, and less government spending—was rejected by the president's administration.**

All four examples are correct, but numbers 2 and 4 place more emphasis on the component within them because of the dashes. Also, you have probably noticed that number 4 is much clearer than number 3 because the dashes clearly mark where the component begins and ends, whereas the reader might become confused by all the commas in number 3. In other words, you can use the dash to make sure your reader clearly understands your point.

In addition, you have an added advantage when using dashes over commas: you can use a full sentence as a component. For example, examine these sentences:

**Linda Simpson—her enemies call her the author of our nation’s economic woes—has resigned her office with the present administration.**

**The present economic condition—Linda Simpson calls it an economic disaster— will require stringent fiscal measures before improving.**

Notice how economical your sentence is when you can interject another entire sentence into the middle of it. Combining sentences in this way accentuates the relationship between the ideas and helps you draw attention to the component within the dashes.

### 5) Adding Words to the End of a Sentence

You can also use a dash to attach material to the end of your sentence when there is a clear break in the continuity of the sentence. Here are two examples:

**The president will be unable to win enough votes for another term of office—unless, of course, he can reduce unemployment and the deficit simultaneously.**

**Generally, the president’s economic policies have proven ineffective—although, it’s true that he has lowered inflation considerably.**

These two samples show how you can attach added material to the end of your sentence.

Use dashes sparingly—only for those occasions when you wish to show special emphasis. They can help you communicate effectively in certain situations, but you don’t want to clutter your prose with too many of them.

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## The Apostrophe

An apostrophe is a signal telling the reader that a word is either a possessive or a contraction.

### 1) To Form Contractions

As you know, a contraction is simply two words collapsed into one. You use contradictions most often in informal or personal types of writing but usually not in more formal types. When you speak, you use contractions every day. Here are some common contractions:

**Cannot-- can’t**  
**Will not-- won’t**  
**Do not-- don’t**  
**We are-- we’re**  
**It is-- it’s**  
**You are-- you’re**

The apostrophe in the contraction above tells the reader that you have omitted a letter or two from the word—the letter *o* in three of the cases above. Undoubtedly, you have already mastered contractions, so we won’t go into



detail. However, we will mention one common mistake. Remember that the apostrophe marks the *missing letter*. Don't make the common mistake of placing the apostrophe between the two words, such as in these cases: *should'nt, do'nt, etc.*

## 2) To Form Possessives

The apostrophe is also used to mark the possessive. The possessive tells the reader that someone or something *owns* or *possesses* the thing that comes after the possessive. Here are five examples:

**Ronni's word processor**  
**The banker's log book**  
**The bank's holdings**  
**The nation's GNP**  
**The year's end**

The possessive noun in each of the examples above (*Ronni's, banker's, bank's, nation's, year's*) indicated to the reader that something is owned by something or someone else. In most cases, to make the possessive you simply add an 's to the end of the noun. This is quite easy. The problem arises when a noun is both *plural* and *possessive*. Certainly, there can be more than one Ronni, and they both can own the word processor. Or more than one banker can own the logbook. In such cases, you simply place the apostrophe after rather than before the *s*:

**Ronnis'**  
**Bankers'**  
**Banks'**  
**Nations'**

Some writers become confused when they must make a possessive of singular nouns that already end in *s*. As usual, you make the possessive by adding 's to the word; however, some writers and editors argue that the two *s*'s are redundant and that therefore you can eliminate the second *s*, ending up with the *s*'. That is, they argue that there is really no need to include an *s* after the apostrophe, since the apostrophe already tells readers that the word is possessive. Others argue that you should drop the final *s* only on words of several syllables but retain it on short words. Since there is no agreement on this difficult problem, you must make your own choice. However, regardless of which option you choose, do remember to be consistent. Here are three nouns which already end in *s* and their corresponding possessive forms:

<b>James</b>	<b>James's</b>	<b>James'</b>
<b>Jones</b>	<b>Jones's</b>	<b>Jones'</b>
<b>Class</b>	<b>class's</b>	<b>class'</b>

Finally, the apostrophe is used in one other way. Although the apostrophe is never used to make a word plural, it is used to make letters and numerals plural:

**Although I received C's and D's in many of my college classes, I always received A's in my business classes.**

**My sister received straight A's throughout her college career.**

**My score sheet showed that I had six 5's and three 4's.**