

Colons

Compiled by Elaine Wilson for Shawnee State University Reading and Writing Center

What is a colon?

A colon is used to introduce something: a word, a phrase, a sentence, a quotation, or a list.

Colons can be used...

When two or more items are listed after a complete sentence and when introductory words like *namely* and *for example* are not used. (Do not use a colon after a verb because the verb does the job alone.)

“The recipe called for simple ingredients: flour, sugar, and milk.”

“His weaknesses are his downfall, namely, his lack of restraint.”

After a complete sentence to place special emphasis on a particular piece of information.

“Her dance skills lacked one thing: fluidity.”

“My cat does two things well: eating and sleeping.”

To introduce a direct quotation, especially long or formal quotes.

“The President reprimanded our group: “Your actions are unacceptable and an embarrassment to the entire organization.”

To address a person in a formal or business letter. A comma is used in informal or personal writing.

“To whom it may concern:”

“Dear Sir or Madam:”

“Dear friend,”

To separate a title from a subtitle.

“Living with a Roommate: The Simple Guide to Sharing Space.”

Things to remember...

- Using too many colons can make your essay over-structured without exhibiting your own writing style.
- The correct way to use a colon, semicolon, hyphen, and dash can sometimes be confusing. It is important to be familiar with the rules when writing formal essays.