



Semicolon and Colon Usage

Semicolon

RULE: Use the semicolon to separate certain independent clauses and to separate certain units in a series.

A. Separating independent clauses not joined by coordinating conjunctions.

Use a semicolon to separate two closely related independent clauses that are not joined by one of the **coordinating conjunctions: and, but, for, nor, or, so, yet.**

Examples:

indep. clause

indep. clause

a. correct: Phyl was the only nurse; the surgeon needed her.

incorrect: Phyl was the only nurse, the surgeon needed her.

indep. clause

indep. clause

b. correct: The dam broke; the area was flooded.

incorrect: The dam broke, the area was flooded.

indep. clause

indep. clause

c. correct: The sun had set; lights came on in all the houses.

incorrect: As the sun was setting; lights came on in all the houses.

As the sun was setting is a dependent clause. A dependent clause contains a subject and verb unit but cannot stand alone as a sentence. Some other expressions that introduce dependent clauses are **after, although, as if, as long as, because, before, even, if, provided, since, that, though, unless, until, what, whatever, when, whenever, where, which, while, who, whoever, whose, why.**

B. Separating independent clauses joined by coordinating conjunctions. Use

a semicolon to separate two independent clauses that are joined by a coordinating conjunction when at least one of the clauses is long or contains commas.

Examples:

- a. He overhauled the engine, repaired the dent, and replaced the tires; and when he had finished, he sold the car.
- b. Lyn was, to be sure, the only person to have seen her alone that day; and so you must, the inspector has told us, ask Lyn.
- c. The internal temperature of the compound as determined by Reid, Stainback, and Turgot differs significantly from our measurements; and the problem is to determine why.

C. Separating independent clauses that are joined by transitional words such as therefore. Use a semicolon to separate two independent clauses that are joined by the words **for example, for instance, that is, besides, accordingly, moreover, nevertheless, furthermore, otherwise, therefore, however, consequently, also, thus, instead, hence, still**. Generally, a comma follows such a word.

Examples:

- a. This book contains two tables of contents; however, only one is alphabetically arranged.
- b. Children are basically honest people; therefore, it is unfortunate when adults teach them, by example, to lie.
- c. Styles in music change; consequently, today's top ten harmonies will be tomorrow's lost chords.

D. Before explanatory or enumerating words. A semicolon is also used to signal the approach of words that explain or enumerate. Some of these words are **as, for example, for instance, namely, that is, that is to say**.

Examples:

- a. Concord was the home of four famous authors; namely, Thoreau, Alcott, Emerson, Hawthorne.
- b. Both jobs can be filled by a man already in our employ; namely, Fred Jackson.
- c. Some colours blend together very well; for example, brown and yellow.

E. Separating units in a series. Use a semicolon to separate units of a series when the units themselves contain commas.

Examples:

- a. Maud, the violinist; Herbert, the flutist; and Grace, the noted harpist, were waiting for their instruments to arrive.
- b. Witches and medicine men knew the curative powers of the foxglove plant derivative, digitalis; the cinchone tree derivative, quinine; and the deadly nightshade plant derivative, atropine, long before physicians did.
- c. As I reported to you last night, I filled out the forms carefully; my secretary, to whom you spoke, mailed them promptly to your office; and I still have not received a refund.

Colon(:)

RULE 1: The colon is used as a mark of introduction. It may introduce a list of items, an explanation, or a long or formal quotation; or it may introduce a clause that reflects something that is in the clause preceding the colon.

A. Introducing a list

A colon may introduce a list; however, an **independent clause** usually precedes the colon.

Examples:

- a. Correct without colon

The recipe calls for sardines, anchovies, halibut, and herring.

- b. Correct with colon

Indep. clause

The recipe calls for a variety of fish: sardines, anchovies, halibut, and herring.

Indep. clause

The recipe calls for the following: sardines, anchovies, halibut, and herring.

- c. Incorrect with colon

Verb

The recipe includes: sardines, anchovies, halibut, and herring.

(Do not place a colon between a verb and the rest of the sentence).

Preposition

The recipe calls for: sardines, anchovies, halibut, and herring.
(Do not place a colon between a preposition and its object).

The recipe includes various fish, such as: sardines, anchovies, halibut, and herring.
(Do not place a colon after such as).

B. Introducing an explanation

A colon may introduce an explanation (sometimes expressed as a series of steps or events).

Note: The first word of a complete sentence following a colon may be capitalized or not.

Examples:

- a. The accident occurred as follows: Car 1 struck the signal light, causing it to fall on Car 2. Car 2 then bounced into the fire hydrant, breaking it and causing the immediate area to be flooded.
- b. You will need to supply two things for the trip: you will certainly need a sleeping bag; you will probably need an air mattress.

C. Introducing a long or formal quotation

Example:

In her review of the new film, Rona Barrett says: “*One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* is about mental institutions. By the end of the movie you will be thinking of the cuckoos in your own nest”.

D. Introducing a clause that reflects something in the clause preceding the colon

A colon is often used between two independent clauses when the second clause explains or amplifies all or part of the first clause through explanation, rewording, or illustration.

