

Colons and Semicolons

Semicolons...

1. *Complete sentence; complete sentence.*

Connect complete sentences that are closely related.

Strawberry French toast is my favorite breakfast food; I would eat it every day if that were possible.

2. *...list item 1, which includes a comma; list item 2, which may also include a comma; and list item 3, which may also include a comma.*

Separate items in a list when any individual list items contain a comma.

Welcoming customers to the Pancake Cafe were Edna, the new head waitress; Sam, the host; Josie, the cashier; and Larry, a regular customer.

Common mistake—Using a semicolon to join a complete sentence to an incomplete sentence.

Incorrect. Since the diner was packed with waiting customers [incomplete sent.]; Edna handed out free cups of coffee to keep everyone happy [complete sent.].

Correct. The diner was packed with waiting customers [complete sent.]; Edna handed out free cups of coffee to keep everyone happy [complete sent.].

Colons...

1. *Complete sentence: list of items or elaboration.*

Introduce a list of items or elaboration that's preceded by a complete sentence. What comes after the colon may be either a complete sentence or an incomplete sentence.

We still need the following ingredients for a smoothie: blueberries, yogurt, and pineapple.

2. Follow the salutation of a business letter.

Dear Mr. Bacon:

3. Join titles to subtitles.

Mmm Breakfast: Why Bacon Makes Life Better

4. Introduce a quotation that's preceded by a complete sentence. Jimmy's indecision while ordering drove Edna nuts: "Should I have the two-stack or the three?"

Common mistake—Using a colon after an incomplete sentence.

Incorrect. Our new motto is: "Breakfast: it's what's for dinner."

Correct. Our new motto is the following: "Breakfast: it's what's for dinner."

Tip—If you're not sure whether a colon would be appropriate in a sentence, put *namely* in its place. If *namely* makes sense when you re-read the sentence, a colon will work.

There was one obvious place to meet, namely, the pancake house.

There was one obvious place to meet: the pancake house.