



Semicolons, Colons & Dashes

Semicolons, colons, and dashes are confusing for many writers, but they're really easy to understand once you realize that they're very different forms of punctuation. Semicolons and colons, for instance, look a lot alike, but they signal completely different things (semicolons connect whole sentences usually while colons introduce specific bits of information). Dashes have lots of different uses, but they always have an informal quality. None of these punctuation marks should be overused. A good academic writer can get along just fine using mostly periods, commas, and quotation marks.

Semicolons

If you know how to use periods, you already know almost everything about how to use semicolons too. That is, **most semicolons work grammatically like periods, slipping in between two complete sentences**. Let me repeat that: they work just like periods. The difference is that periods *separate* two sentences; semicolons *connect* them. Semicolons tell your reader that the two sentences on either side speak to each other or are part of the same idea. Whether to use a period or semicolon depends completely on context, but here are some possible examples:

We couldn't have avoided the accident if we had tried; the road was oily, it had rained, and our car simply slid into the car in front of us.

There really are no hard and fast rules about writing; everybody discovers a process that works best for him or her.

Frequently you'll see a semicolon acting as a sort of hinge or fulcrum between two parallel sentences, but this is just a variation on the same theme:

Some people love cold weather; others like it sunny and hot.

Whether to use a period or a semicolon in these cases is completely up to you as the writer.

Use a semicolon when you want to communicate to your readers that they should read the next sentence as extending the ideas in the previous sentence.

There's another, less common use for semicolons. Sometimes semicolons can function as a means for breaking up or clarifying a sentence that's extremely long or that has several phrases or clauses that could potentially get muddled or confused. Think of these semicolons functioning as a kind of "heavier" version of the comma:

We went to the store and bought hot dogs, hamburgers, and chicken; chips, pretzels, and potato salad; and ice cream, cookies, and chocolate cake.

But this case is fairly rare. Remember the basic rule: **usually semicolons do exactly the same thing (grammatically, not semantically) that periods do.**

Colons

Colons introduce specific information. Oftentimes the specific information comes in the form of a list of things, but it doesn't have to. The most important rule to remember is that the sentence coming **before** the colon should be a complete sentence that sets the reader up to expect the specific information:

There's one food I just can't stand: lima beans.

There were three major causes of the Civil War: the slavery question, cultural differences between the North and South, and economic pressures.

Colons have a much narrower usefulness than semicolons. Try to remember the basic pattern: general information comes on the left side of the colon, specific information comes on the right. The preceding sentence should excite a kind of expectation in the reader that he or she will learn some specific data, which will come after the colon. Don't add a colon when the specific data is already a part of the previous sentence:

At the store, we bought cookies, chocolate, and red vines.

Dashes

Dashes are by far the trickiest of punctuation marks, because they can perform the same grammatical function as several others--commas, parentheses, semicolons, colons, even periods. As follows:

Dashes can be used in pairs, like commas and parentheses, to set off an inserted comment in a sentence:

The SSU Writing Center--located in 1008 Salazar Library--offers tutorial services to all faculty, staff, and students at Sonoma State.

That summer at camp--I was twelve, I think--I broke my arm.

Compare: "That summer at camp (I was twelve, I think) I broke my arm." Parentheses signal that the enclosed material is very much separate from, even extraneous to the rest of the sentence. Dashes indicate that the material is more important than that but less important or less integral than it would be if it had been set off by a pair of commas.

Dashes can set off and emphasize material at the end of a sentence, like colons or a comma:

I learned a lot about punctuation by reading and writing a lot--but I also keep my grammar handbook right next to my computer.

There's really only one more thing to do--sweep the garage.

Dashes can mark a sudden shift in mood, idea, or tone:

We were on our way--but we sure weren't happy about it.

Essentially, dashes fill in for other forms of punctuation when you want a less formal tone or when you want to set off or emphasize a piece of the sentence.

Note: Don't confuse dashes with hyphens--dashes and hyphens are way more different even than colons are from semicolons. Hyphens affect words--they turn two words into a single idea (for example, *parttime*). Dashes affect whole sentences and clauses. Remember that dashes are made with two hyphens stuck right together, with no space before or after. Get used to typing hyphens (-) and dashes (--) differently and you'll be less likely to confuse the two.

A Brief Quiz--Semicolons (add semicolons or periods where needed)

1. We could not have gone to school if we wanted to the teachers were on strike.
2. Several college students like to eat pizza others like fruit.
3. There is no fast and easy way to learn how to play chess everyone learns at different speeds.
4. I saw you yesterday and I waved, but you did not wave back to me I thought you were mad.
5. (Add commas here too) I love all different kinds of movies: some of my favorites are *Jurassic*

Park Star Wars and Indiana Jones movies *Scream Halloween* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* and *Citizen Kane* *Gone with the Wind* and *Roman Holiday*.

Colons (place where needed--not all sentences will need them)

1. For Jamie's swim party you must bring a swim suit, towel, flippers, goggles, and sun screen.
2. These are my favorite books *God of Small Things*, *The Gathering of Old Men*, and *The Storyteller*.
3. Before you start the job I will need three items valid driver's license, proof of insurance, and social security card.

4. There is one jelly bean that I love sour apple.
5. The three dishes I'm best at cooking are roast chicken, veggie burritos, and cheese omelets.

Dashes (add dashes where needed)

1. If you apply to three colleges which is a good idea you must pay \$50 for each application fee.
2. Within a couple of weeks your agenda will be flooded with reading assignments, and you will need to set aside time a lot of time.
3. People who drink caffeine especially coffee should not drink it before they go to bed, because it might keep them from sleeping.
4. I was really hoping to go out with Mary again but then she dashed all my hopes.
5. Now that fall term is beginning I miss summer already the students are all returning to campus.