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The Semicolon and the Colon

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The Semicolon (;)

Judged by its rate of error (i.e., the number of errors per total uses), the semicolon is certainly the most misunderstood mark of punctuation in the English language, with a rate of error higher even than that of the comma. Therefore, a little clarity is called for.

To understand how the semicolon works, let's first look at the way it is formed: it is a period placed directly above a comma. What does this suggest? It combines the properties of both a period and a comma. If we think of a period as a "stop" and a comma as a "pause," then a semicolon sits at the midpoint between the two; it is a "stop-pause." Thus, as we consider using a semicolon in our writing, it's best to think of it as a hybrid mark performing one of two complementary functions: 1) as a **soft period**, i.e., a "soft stop" or 2) as a **hard comma,** i.e., a "hard pause." The two rules governing the use of the semicolon are based on these two functions.

The Two Rules of the Semicolon:

Rule 1) Use a semicolon to join two closely related independent clauses.

> Saturdays are for doing laundry and grocery shopping; Sundays are for going to church and then sleeping all afternoon.

Rule 2) Use a semicolon to separate items in a series containing other punctuation, especially commas.

> The U.S. Federal Government is composed of three co-equal branches: the Executive Branch, also known as the Presidency; the Legislative Branch, or Congress; and the Judicial Branch, comprising the Supreme Court and other Federal Courts.

Discussion, Rule 1

Under Rule 1, the semicolon is a **soft period**. It is a joining device. Note that on both sides of the semicolon stands an independent clause (a sequence of words that contains a subject and a verb and can stand alone as a sentence). Rather than "separating" these two clauses with a period, the writer "joins" them to show that they are closely related to each other in structure, meaning, or significance. Why not use a comma? Wouldn't a comma join the clauses even better? No, we cannot use a comma alone in this location. A comma is a pause. The convention in English is to stop when we move from one independent clause to another (absent any conjunction between the two). A comma here would yield a type of run-on error known as a "comma splice." The semicolon avoids this error; it allows us to stop softly, as it were, to join and to stop at the same time.

The semicolon as a soft period is commonly used in compound sentences where the second clause begins with a conjunctive adverb ("however," "therefore," "consequently," and others).

Example:

> Some people say that if you use heroin you will die of heroin; however, that is frequently not the case.

In this instance, the second clause calls into question the proposition cited in the first. It is a kind rebuttal to that proposition. This is one of the many ways that two clauses can be "closely related."

Here are a few other ways clauses can be closely related, with or without a conjunctive adverb (not a complete list):

- The second clause stands in contrast to the first (as in the Saturday/Sunday example above).
- The second clause directly explains the first.

  > A tornado is the result of the atmosphere being at war with itself; warm, moist air collides and becomes violently entangled with cold, dry air.

- The second clause presents a cause for the first.

  > Several miles down the road he suddenly stopped; this was where he began to have second thoughts.

- The second clause presents a consequence of the first.

  > She has been arrested for DUI twice this year; as a result, she no longer has a driver's license.

- The second clause is constructed in a parallel, sometimes antithetical, way to the first and should be understood as a statement of equivalent weight.

    They argued about music; about politics they sang in harmony.

Note: As the above examples and discussion show, the semicolon is not a full stop; therefore, the clause following the semicolon does not begin with a capital letter as it would if it followed a period. Together, the two clauses constitute one sentence.

Discussion, Rule 2

Here is the semicolon Rule 2 again: Use a semicolon to separate items in a series containing other punctuation, especially commas.

Under Rule 2, the semicolon is a **hard comma**. It is a separating device. Ordinarily in English, we use commas to separate items in a series (i.e., a sequence of three or more logically and grammatically parallel words, phrases, or clauses: “served apples, oranges, and grapes''; “designed, built, and landscaped his own home”; “had pearly-white teeth, a flashing smile, and a sunny personality”). Occasionally, however, other rules of punctuation require us to deploy commas within each item in the series (as in the Federal Government example above). Stifling befuddlement quickly descends upon the reader if we use commas to separate items in a series that contains other commas serving other purposes. Consider this sentence:

> There are three things you need to do to avoid being late to your appointment: buy a bus ticket in advance, which can be done online, get out of bed on time, which I know is a challenge for you, and make your way quickly, running even, to the nearest bus stop, which you should have located beforehand.

The writer of this passage is not helping the reader much. We are confronted by a flurry of commas, seven in total, only two of which are demarking the items in the series; the other five are doing other things. Because all these commas are “equal,” i.e., creating pauses of equal degree, it becomes maddeningly hard work as we read through the passage to discern the outline of the series, to distinguish the serial commas from the others. Indeed, without the phrase “three things” in the introductory clause to cue us, the series may not even register in our brains. Thus we need a higher level of separation for the series, a harder pause between each item. This hard pause (“hard comma’) is the job of the semicolon. Here is the passage corrected:

> There are three things you need to do to avoid being late to your appointment: buy a bus ticket in advance, which can be done online; get out of bed on time, which I know is a challenge for you; and make your way quickly, running even, to the nearest bus stop, which you should have located beforehand.

Isn't that better? It's still not a particularly easy sentence, but the information is much better sorted. The series is brought forward into bold relief, as it were, by the semicolons.

Further examples (semicolons bracketed for study):

1. Listening to the songwriters Jackson Browne and Bob Dylan always leaves me with a mixed impression[;] the lyrics are magnificent, but the music seems rather banal. [soft period]
2. Peter and Mary are building a house in the country[;] they've had enough of the city. [soft period]
3. Visible from his apartment window was a very old oak tree, almost dead[;] an unmaintained swimming pool, green with algae[;] and, in the distance, a highway that he had never travelled on. [hard comma]
4. The definitive cultural and political trends of the 19th century were already established in the late 18th century and did not fade until well into the 20th[;] consequently, historians now accept the term "the long 19th century" to refer to the entire 19th century era. [soft period]
5. When you are going for a hike, be sure to bring plenty of water, as much as you can reasonably carry[;] a cell phone, fully charged[;] and a map of the terrain you're heading into. [hard comma]
6. Our political divide is distilled for us in the final phrase of The Pledge of Allegiance, "with liberty and justice for all": the conservative leans on the word "liberty"[;] the progressive leans on "justice." [soft period]

*A final word of advice about the semicolon: Do not use it too much. In just about every case where the semicolon is used under Rule 1, as a soft period, it is the writer's choice to use it—it is preferred but not required. A period in these cases would be acceptable. Excessive employment of the semicolon—that is, using it in every single instance where two consecutive independent clauses might possibly be perceived as "closely related"—is a sign that the writer is painfully self-conscious about punctuation.

The Colon(:)

Sharing a key with the semicolon on the standard keyboard is the colon, a mark with a similar look but a very different grammatical function. The colon is an introductory device.

First, let's acknowledge and set aside the colon's simple mechanical uses, e.g.,

- to separate hour from minutes in clock time:

  8:15 a.m.;

- to separate titles from subtitles:

    The Darkest Night: Scenes from the Bottom of the Sea;

- to separate chapter from verse in biblical citations:

    Genesis 4: 2-4;

- to indicate a pair of eyes in an emoticon:

    :)

- to indicate the speaker in screenplay dialogue:

    Frank: Help! I'm going to fall out of the boat!
    Carl: Here, take my hand;

and a few others.

Apart from these mechanical functions, the primary job of the colon in formal prose is this:

- to introduce clarifying material.

It is this application that we will explore here.

Discussion

Given the above analysis of the formation of the semicolon, one might think that the colon, being composed of two periods, one set atop the other, is a "hard stop." It is not. The colon creates a kind of "expectant pause." It says, "something important to follow, something clarifying, a summing up, or something more specific or concrete. Wait for it!"

In the context of essay writing, an independent clause should precede a colon, but the colon need not be followed by an independent clause. The kind of material that follows, i.e., is introduced by, a colon depends on what the independent clause preceding it leads us to anticipate. Quite frequently, the independent clause sets up some sort of list:

> Desert landscaping usually incorporates three types of plants: cacti, arid-climate trees and shrubs (such as mesquite and creosote), and ground-crawling succulents.

Note that the sequence of words preceding the colon has a subject ("landscaping") and a main verb ("incorporates") and can stand alone as a sentence (could be punctuated with a period); it is an independent clause. This clause tells the reader what to expect following the colon, in this case a list of desert flora.

In executing its introductory function, the colon is a remarkably versatile instrument; it leads us into many kinds of clarifying matter. Here are a few of those kinds of matter (not a complete list):

- A summary

  Single income families struggle to pay for food, utilities, transportation, and medical care: all the basic necessities.

- An example or examples

  Genocide occurred numerous times throughout the world during the 20th century: in Armenia in the teens and twenties, in Germany in the thirties and forties, in Cambodia in the seventies, Rwanda in the eighties, Bosnia in the nineties, and on and on.

- A quotation

  The great baseball manager Leo Durocher defined the essential relation between human kindness and competition quite succinctly: "Nice guys finish last."

  Note: This usage of the colon is very important in research-based, sourced writing, which is most college writing.

- An appositive

  No man loves his country more than one who thoughtfully criticizes it; in his vision of its ideal he is a loyal and hopeful citizen: a patriot.

- An explanation

  Why do our pipes burst when we have a hard freeze? It's the result of an oddity in physics: H^2O is the only compound that is liquid at room temperature and that expands when it freezes.

- A definition

  He had a rather sour view of the meaning of "democracy": government by fools.

It's quite a wide array of possibilities, both substantively and grammatically. In every case, though, we sense the same expectant pause, briefly felt, created by the colon; we anticipate: "something is next."

Some Variations

- Using “as follows” or “the following” before a colon:

We find these phrases frequently appearing in front of a colon. The practice is acceptable, but there is reason for caution. Consider the following:

> To ensure that your boiled egg peels easily when you are ready to eat it, you should do as follows: 1) place the raw egg into cold water, then bring it to boil; 2) boil for five minutes, then remove from heat; 3) leave the egg in the water while the water cools for a few minutes; 4) drench the egg in ice water for a little while before placing it in the refrigerator.

This colon is a common device for introducing steps in a process. However, it is the writer’s choice to set up the steps in this manner, and it may not be the best choice. In a sense, the colon itself says “as follows.” Explicitly stated, the phrase may be seen as superfluous. As a general principle of style, it is best to avoid “as follows” and “the following” whenever you can. Use them only when there is no better option. A more efficient alternative would be this:

> To ensure that your boiled egg peels easily when you are ready to eat it, you should carry out four steps: . . . .

Much better.

- Using “this” before a colon:

“This” by itself preceding a colon is acceptable and unproblematic, as long as it ends an independent clause.

Example:

> I’ll just conclude with this: no political party ever has a mandate.

In many cases, however, it might be best to follow “this” with a noun that summarizes or characterizes the statement to follow:

> I’ll just conclude with this admonition: no political party ever has a mandate.

- Placing a colon after “such as”:

Not acceptable. Do not do it.

Example:

> You may not write off your personal expenses, such as: family dinners out and baseball tickets.

The word “as” in this sentence is a preposition. A preposition is followed by its object (“family dinners out,” etc.) We never place a colon between a preposition and its object.

- Placing a colon after single, capitalized transitional words and phrases such as “For example,” “Example,” “For instance,” “In addition,” and others:

This practice is generally considered acceptable only in instructional material. You have seen many instances in this document. However, in conventional formal prose, i.e., prose conforming to standard rules and principles of paragraphing and sentence construction—e.g., no sentence fragments—the practice is viewed as conversational or even lazy. “For example” standing alone is, after all, a fragment.

- Placing a colon after single, capitalized directive words or phrases like “Consider,” “Note,” “Beware,” “Attention,” Caution,” “A word to the wise,” and others:

  Beware: These lightning strikes have eyes!

This technique is acceptable but should be practiced sparingly.

Capitalizing an Independent Clause after a Colon

This is optional. Like the semicolon, the colon occupies its own unique spot somewhere between a period and a comma. If what follows the colon is an independent clause, you may choose to capitalize the first letter or not. However, if the independent clause is a quotation whose first letter is capitalized in its original source, you should capitalize it as well.

Practice:

Now let’s do a quick review. Read the following sentences. Write a semicolon or a colon, whichever is appropriate to the context, in the space provided. (Answer key on last page.)

Water always finds its own level [1]__ the same is true of people.

There are three universities that he is interested in attending [2]__ Yale, which has the best academics [3]__ Michigan, with excellent academics and great athletics as well [4]__ and Florida, where the weather is wonderful year round.

The great Russian composer Alexander Borodin once said something revealing about why he chose teaching chemistry, rather than composing, as his livelihood [5]__ “Respectable people do not make love or compose music as a career.”

When they got home from dinner, their entire apartment was flooded [6]__ the cat had inadvertently turned on the bathroom faucet.

One would think that people who say the earth is flat would have no trouble providing proof of their claim [7]__ a photo of the edge of the world.

Human rights and responsibilities are not attributes of the individual [8]__ they are social and reciprocal in nature [9]__ I am responsible for your rights [10]__ you are responsible for mine.

Answer key:

1) ;
2) :
3) ;
4) ;
5) :
6) ;
7) :
8) ;
9) :
10) ;

That is all. May your semicolons and colons be blessed.