

COLONS & SEMICOLONS



Compared to other punctuation marks, such as commas, **colons** and **semicolons** are used sparingly. But when used properly, they can be powerful tools in crafting clear, compelling writing. On the ACT or SAT, you'll be tested on how to properly punctuate sentences using colons and semicolons.

Colons

The main and most important rule you need to know about colons is that they always follow an independent clause, which is a fancy name for a complete sentence (i.e. a sentence that can stand on its own). If the sentence that comes before a colon is not complete, then the placement of the colon is incorrect.

For example:

Wrong: The cake was made of: flour, butter, sugar, and eggs.

Correct: The cake was made of the following ingredients: flour, butter, sugar, and eggs.

In the first sentence, "The cake was made of" does not constitute a full, independent clause. And so, the placement of the colon is technically wrong. In the second sentence, the clause preceding the colon stands on its own as a full, complete sentence. And so, the colon is correct.

As you can see in the examples above, **colons are commonly used to introduce or draw attention to a list of items**. Colons can also be used to introduce or highlight a noun, noun phrase, quotation, for example:

Those Wendy's commercials from the 80's coined an iconic phrase: "Where's the beef?"

Winston Churchill said it best: "A joke is a very serious thing."

Running your own business has one major benefit: being your own boss.

Colons can also be used to join two complete sentences if the second sentence summarizes or explains the first. Example:

Overeating is not healthful: it can cause you to gain weight and feel lethargic.

NOTE: Although a colon can join two sentences, avoid doing this too often in your writing. Too many sentences joined with a colon can make your writing seem choppy and harder to read.

Semicolons

Because it's used relatively rarely compared to most other punctuation marks, the poor semicolon is often misused and misunderstood. But using semicolons correctly is actually quite simple and very useful in limited doses.

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Semicolons are used to join two sentences when the ideas expressed in each sentence are at least somewhat related.

The rule regarding semicolons is simple: **the clauses on either side of a semicolon must be complete sentences.**

And that's it! That's really all you need to know about how to use a semicolon. (Well, actually, there's one more thing, but we'll get to that in a moment.)

Take a look at the following example:

I went to the park to play basketball; I ended up playing all afternoon.

Note that the clauses on either side of the semicolon are complete sentences. But now consider this sentence:

I went to the park to play basketball; and I ended up playing all afternoon.

In this case, the semicolon is incorrect because the clause following the semicolon is not a complete sentence. It's a subtle but important difference.

You can also use semicolons to separate items in a list when the items already use commas. For example, look at the following sentence:

To prepare for baseball practice I gathered a bunch of equipment: some old, scuffed balls, a few long, wooden bats, and some new, clean uniforms.

Using only commas to separate the items in the list can be a bit confusing. Using semicolons helps make the list easier to read:

To prepare for baseball practice I gathered a bunch of equipment: some old, scuffed balls; a few long, wooden bats; and some new, clean uniforms.

Main Takeaway

Remember the basic rule concerning colons--a colon must be preceded by a complete sentence--and the rule concerning semicolons--a semicolon must be preceded and followed by complete sentences--and you should be fine.