



## Punctuation: Semicolons and Colons

### Semicolons in Sentences

- Semicolons are used to combine two independent clauses without using connecting words. They function the same way a period does in most instances. An independent clause is a clause that can stand alone as a complete sentence. It contains a subject and verb and expresses a complete thought.
  - Examples
    - The students went to Simpson Library to study for the exam; they worked late into the night.
    - My friend and I decided to go for a walk in downtown Fredericksburg; we enjoyed the sunshine and fresh air.
- They are also used to join two independent clauses with a transition word or phrase.
- These words are followed by a comma and include however, therefore, consequently, otherwise, nevertheless, thus, etc.
  - Examples
    - The students went to Simpson Library to study for the exam; thus, they received good grades.
    - My friend and I decided to go for a walk downtown; however, it began to rain that afternoon.

**Speaking and Writing Center [1]:** This is a complete sentence. It contains a subject (the students), a verb (went), and expresses a complete thought.

**Speaking and Writing Center [2]:** This is also a complete sentence. It contains a subject (they), a verb (worked), and expresses a complete thought.

**Speaking and Writing Center [3]:** This is a complete sentence. It contains a subject (my friend and I), a verb (decided), and expresses a complete thought.

**Speaking and Writing Center [4]:** This is a complete sentence. It contains a subject (we), a verb (enjoyed), and expresses a complete thought.

### Semicolons in Lists

- Semicolons can help separate items on a list when commas are also being used. This is because it can be confusing to only use commas when there are two different kinds of lists happening within one sentence. This is a very different way of using semicolons.
  - Examples
    - He went to get bread, milk, butter, and cheese from Giant; shampoo and jeans from Target; and a mystery novel from Barnes & Noble.
    - They bought shiny, red shoes; a soft, pink sweater; and a sleek, brown hat.

**Speaking and Writing Center [5]:** Notice that the semicolons are separating items on the main or "umbrella" list-- the places he went (Giant, Target, and Barnes & Noble)-- while commas are being used to separate items on the smaller lists-- the items bought at each place.

**Speaking and Writing Center [6]:** Here, multiple adjectives (shiny, red; soft, pink; sleek, brown) are used to describe each noun-- they constitute the smaller list within the larger list of things (nouns) that were bought (shoes, sweater, hat).



## Colons

- Colons can be used after a complete sentence to introduce a list of items or to provide examples of something.
  - Introducing a list
    - He packed three things for class: his lunch, his laptop, and his notebook.
- They are only used to separate sentences when the second sentence summarizes or explains the first sentence.
  - Examples
    - Life is like a box of chocolates: you never know what you are going to get.
- Colons are also used to express other writing conventions.
  - Subtitles
    - *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text*
    - *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*
  - After a greeting in a formal business letter
    - To whom it may concern:  
Please review my application and consider me for this position.
  - A colon should be used to introduce a quote after an independent clause.
    - Maya Angelou wrote a powerful message in her book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside of you.”

**Speaking and Writing Center [7]:** Notice that this is a complete sentence before the colon. We don't have information about what three things, but what comes before the colon can be considered a complete sentence.

**Speaking and Writing Center [8]:** Again, notice that what is before the colon is a complete sentence.

**Speaking and Writing Center [9]:** We cannot use a semicolon here because the phrase “because the leaves change colors” is an incomplete sentence.

**Speaking and Writing Center [10]:** The phrase “They went to the CRUC and had” is not a complete sentence. When using colons to separate items on a list, the phrase before the list must be a complete sentence.

**Speaking and Writing Center [11]:** A verb is a word that describes an action. Some examples include swim, go, talk, and sing.

**Speaking and Writing Center [12]:** The object of the verb is the person or thing affected by the verb. For example, in the sentence “She read to Cindy” the verb is “read” and the object is “Cindy”.

**Speaking and Writing Center [13]:** A complement is a noun or adjective group that comes after the verb. It also describes the subject of the sentence.

**Speaking and Writing Center [14]:** In this sentence, “is” is the verb and “homemade apple pie” is the complement. Here it would be incorrect to use a colon. Like the previous example, what comes before the colon also is not a complete sentence.

## Common Mistakes

- Connecting incomplete sentences with a semicolon
  - My favorite season is fall; because the leaves change colors. (incorrect)
  - My favorite season is fall; the leaves change colors. (correct)
- Using a colon before a list when the introduction is an incomplete sentence
  - They went to the CRUC and had: french fries, pizza, and salad. (incorrect)
  - They went to the CRUC and had french fries, pizza, and salad. (correct)
- Inserting a colon between a verb and its object or complement.
  - His best dessert recipe is: homemade apple pie. (incorrect)
  - His best dessert recipe is homemade apple pie. (correct)