COLONS & SEMICOLONS

Problem

Many writers are unfamiliar with how to use both colons (:) and semicolons (;) in American academic writing. Often they will use both marks interchangeably or inappropriately use another punctuation mark, like a period or comma. Misused colons and semicolons in your writing can result in grammatically incorrect sentence structures, which can confuse readers.

Solutions

USE A COLON TO...

• Introduce a list or quotation at the end of a complete sentence.

    Student Writing Support helps students at any stage of the writing process: brainstorming, outlining, drafting, and revising.

    Jarratt questions the pedagogical stance of avoiding conflicts in the classroom when teaching composition: “Only through recognition of and argument over differences can conflict be resolved into homonoia, like-mindedness” (114).

• Connect titles and subtitles.


    In the article “My Life as an Infomercial: On Time, Teaching, and Technology,” Pat Miller discusses the role of technology in teaching online courses.

• Connect two sentences if the second is a restatement or further explanation of the first.

    Minds are like parachutes: they only work when they are open.
    I devised a new exercise plan: I would get up early and jog every morning.

• Separate the different increments of time.

    The President started his State of the Union Address at 8:35 p.m., EST.
    She ran the marathon in 4:27:53.

• Express ratios.

    In water, the ratio of hydrogen to oxygen is 2:1.
    The side ratios of a right-angled isosceles triangle are always 2:2:3.
USE A SEMICOLON TO...

- **Connect two closely related sentences.** Always use a semicolon when you use "however" as a conjunction in a compound sentence.

  Writing centers are great; they teach students how to become better writers.

  I had been cycling to work all summer long; however, I rode the bus today because I woke up late.

- **Separate items in a list when those items have commas within them.**

  I have visited Boise, ID; Austin, TX; Denver, CO; and Portland, OR in the past year.

  Yesterday, I had to visit the doctor’s office; edit, print, and mail my job application; and choose a restaurant for our five-year-anniversary celebration.

---

**Works Cited**

