

COLONS & SEMICOLONS

Problem

Many writers are unfamiliar with how to use both colons (:) and semicolons (;) in 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.**

Writers can visit Student Writing Support at any stage of their writing process: brainstorming, outlining, drafting, or revising.

Jarratt (1991) questioned 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” (p. 114).

- **Connect titles and subtitles.**

Defining reality: Definitions and the politics of meaning, by Edward Schiappa (2003), won the 2003 Gary A. Olson Award for the Best Book in Rhetorical & Cultural Theory.

In the article “My life as an infomercial: On time, teaching, and technology,” Pat Miller (2001) 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.

References

Jarratt, S. (1991). Feminism and composition: The case for conflict. In P. Harkin & J. Schilb (Eds.), *Contending with words: Composition and rhetoric in a postmodern age* (pp. 105–123). New York: Modern Language Association.

Miller, P. (2001). My life as an infomercial: On time, teaching, and technology. *Profession*, 137–141.

Schiappa, E. (2003). *Defining reality: Definitions and the politics of meaning*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.