



## Help With: Colons and Semicolons

A **colon** is used if you want to point out the result or consequence of a statement—the complement to what you wrote in the first part of the sentence.

*Iraq's actions can only mean one thing: war. The captain only said one thing: "Let's do it!"  
She is only going to Seoul for one thing: to shop for clothes.*

Notice that you can have various types of phrases after the colon. But shorter is usually better.

*She is only going to Seoul for one thing: shopping for clothes.  
She is only going to Seoul for one thing: she wants to shop for clothes.*

Colons are also used to begin a list. Use commas to set apart elements of the list, and include an *and* or *or* before the last element.

*We need some groceries for the party: grapes, beer, eggs, and chocolate.*

Don't get confused if sometimes a writer lumps together similar things with an *and*, treating a group as one element in a list. The following sentence is fine:

*We need four things: grapes, beer, salt and pepper, and chocolate.*

But make sure that your sentence doesn't start including too many elements with different verb tenses or phrasings. Avoid full sentences as elements. The reader can easily get lost.

*We need some groceries: grapes would be nice, my roommate Sean drank all the beer, I really like beans, and we'll be needing chocolate.* (Confusing)

A **semicolon** is used if you want to link two sentences together that have a related subject.

- Peter is very lazy, he plays video games all day.* (wrong—comma splice)
- Peter is very lazy, as he plays video games all day.* (right—conjunction)
- Peter is very lazy. He plays video games all day.* (right—separate sentences)
- Peter is very lazy; he plays video games all day.* (right—semicolon use)

Semicolons are used the same way as a period is, and should not be overused. But if you want to emphasize that two statements are connected, a semicolon works well.

*Peter is very lazy; he plays video games all day.*

Sometimes a semicolon is useful to avoid referent confusion. Look at the following sentences:

*My sisters are all successful. Susan works in a button factory, Shirley is a doctor, and Amy is a pilot. That's why I don't see her often.*

Who is "her"? If you want to make it clear that the *her* is Amy, and that being a pilot is the reason you don't see her often, use a semicolon:  *Amy is a pilot; that's why I don't see her often.*