



Semicolons and Colons

Semicolons (;)

A semicolon is a form of punctuation that sorts out complex lists or links complete clauses.

Sorting out a complex list:

- **Place semicolons between items in lists if some items the list include commas.**
 - My classmates are from Milwaukee, Wisconsin; St. Paul, Minnesota; Des Moines, Iowa; and Detroit, Michigan.
 - Our good time at the fair included making a Spin-a-Paint masterpiece; going to the art show, where my mother's ceramic vase won a ribbon; visiting the animal barns; and eating a honey sundae, an onion blossom, and, of course, mini doughnuts.

Linking closely-related independent clauses:

- **Place a semicolon between two independent clauses (they could stand alone as a sentence) to link them in the same sentence.**
 - I don't have time to practice fiddling; my school work is too demanding.
 - It looks like it is going to rain; I better bring my umbrella.
 - When going to school in St. Paul, Minnesota, I lived in an off-campus apartment complex; my next-door neighbor became my best friend.

Linking complete clauses with a conjunctive adverb:

- Place a semicolon between **independent clauses linked with a conjunctive adverb**, also known as a transitional word or phrase. Some common conjunctive adverbs are *therefore*, *however*, *consequently*, and *hence*. Phrases include *on the other hand*, *in fact*, and *in conclusion*. Follow transitional words or phrases with commas.
 - It looks like it might rain; however, the weather report suggests sunshine all day.
 - I don't have time to practice before the concert; in fact, I hardly have enough time to change into my concert outfit.

When NOT to Use a Semicolon

- Use commas, **not** semicolons, after an independent clause (it could stand alone as a full sentence) joined with another independent clause by a coordinating conjunction (*for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, *so*).
 - It looks like it is going to rain, **but** the weather report on the radio said to expect sunshine all day.
- Use a colon—not a semicolon—when what follows the punctuation restates what comes before.
 - There are two things I need to do today: call my mother and feed the cat.
- Use commas to separate items in a list if none of the items in the list require commas too.
 - The first-year curriculum included courses in Torts, Contracts, Criminal Law, Legal Writing, and Justice.

Colons (:)

A colon is a form of punctuation used in several different situations. It often sets up and draws the reader's attention to the ideas that come after it.

Some correct uses:

- **Prior to a list**
 - Our girls softball team will play the following rivals: Aberdeen, Fort Hays State, Arkansas-Monticello, and Southwestern Oklahoma State.
- **Before an explanation that has a complete clause (could be a sentence) before it**
 - There was only one priority left for me to see to: finishing my homework.
- **To separate an independent clause from a quotation**
 - My baseball coach loves to use the same phrase before every practice and game: "Shut up and play baseball."
- **In a formal or business address**
 - Dear Ms. Jackson:
- **To indicate time**
 - The train leaves at 3:47 p.m.
- **Between a title and subtitle**
 - The textbook for our class is called *Ideas across Time: Classic and Contemporary Readings for Composition*.
 - The movie I liked best last year was *Impossible Journey: Never Say Never*.
- **A scripture reference**
 - Indicate the book of Luke, chapter 4, verse 7, like this: Luke 4:7.
 - Indicate the chapter of Sura, title 1, verse 6, in the Qur'an like this: Sura 1:6.
- **To indicate a ratio**
 - The ratio of cats to dogs was 4:1.

When NOT to Use a Colon

- Do **not** use a colon after a verb of being (am, are, were, was, will be, shall be, etc.).
 - **Incorrect:** Her favorite subjects are: math and English.
 - **Correct:** Her favorite subjects are math and English.
- Do **not** use a colon after a preposition
 - **Incorrect:** The movie was directed by: Ingmar Bergman.
 - **Correct:** The movie was directed by Ingmar Bergman.
- Do **not** use a colon after words or expressions *such as, for example, including, or namely*.
 - **Incorrect:** Ice cream comes in many delicious flavors, such as: bubble gum, vanilla, and chocolate. Chocolate includes: milk, dark, and double-double-dark.
 - **Correct:** Ice cream comes in many delicious flavors, such as chocolate, vanilla, and bubble gum. Chocolate includes milk, dark, and double-double-dark.
 - **Incorrect:** She has many interests, including: salsa dancing, quilting, making shadow boxes, memorizing the Latin names for trees, and bee keeping.
 - **Correct:** She has many interests, including quilting, dancing, and reading.
 - **Correct:** She has one favorite hobby: cake decorating.

Practice Exercises

For each sentence, select the punctuation mark from the choices inside the parentheses.

1. The defendant failed to check his rear-view mirror before changing lanes (, / ; /:) therefore (, / ; /:) he breached a duty owed to the plaintiff.
2. There are two kinds of fruit on the table (*no punctuation needed* / : / ;) oranges and apples.
3. I have a lot to do today (*no punctuation needed* / , / : / ;) study for my test(: / ; / ,) do my laundry(: / ; / ,) both lights and darks(: / ; / ,) wash the car (: / ; / ,) and call my mom.
4. Zach came to class breathless and overwhelmed (: / ; / ,) he had just come from volleyball practice.
5. The Europe trip will include visits to (*no punctuation needed* / , / ; /:) London(, / ;) England (, / ;) Rome(, / ;) Italy (, / ;) Paris(, / ;) France (, / ;) Munich(, / ;) Germany (, / ;) and Warsaw(, / ;) Poland.
6. The book was written by (*no punctuation needed* / , / :) Peter Jay Montreville.
7. He was very tired (*no punctuation needed* / , / ;) but he decided to go to class rather than take a nap.
8. He was very tired however he decided his class was too important to miss.
9. The tables had wonderful decorations (*no punctuation needed* / , / ; / :) flowers(, / ;) balloons(, / ;) confetti(, / ;) ribbons(, / ;) and marble birds.
10. We discussed the Torah's Behar (Leviticus 25(:/),)1-26(:/.) The Joy of Opportunity.
11. The colors of the banner are (*no punctuation needed* / , / :) blue, red, yellow, and black.
12. The lunchroom was decorated with (*no punctuation needed* / , / ; /:) balloons (, / ;) red (, / ;) yellow (, / ;) and black streamers (, / ;) and glow-in-the-dark stars.
13. The play was excellent (, / : / ;) the actors were lively (*no punctuation needed* / , / ; /:) and the set was phenomenal.
14. The first book he cited in his paper was *Understanding Comics* (*no punctuation needed* / , / : / ;) *The Invisible Art*.
15. Her purse held many items (*no punctuation needed* / , / :) including (*no punctuation needed* / , / :) chapstick, money, a cell phone, cough drops, chopsticks, and some pens.
16. It was the first of May (, / ;) all the spring buds on the trees were starting to open.
17. It rained heavily during the afternoon (, / ; / :) however (, / ; / :) we managed to have our picnic anyway. (*For answers to these exercises, see the next page*)

Practice Exercise Answers

1. The defendant failed to check his rear-view mirror before changing lanes; therefore, he breached a duty owed to the plaintiff.
2. There are two kinds of fruit on the table: oranges and apples.
3. I have a lot to do today: study for my test; do my laundry, both lights and darks; wash the car; and call my mother.
4. Zach came to class breathless and overwhelmed; he had just come from volleyball practice.
5. The Europe trip will include visits to London, England; Rome, Italy; Paris, France; Munich, Germany; and Warsaw, Poland.
6. The book was written by Peter Jay Montreville.
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14. The first book she cited in her paper was *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*.
15. Her purse held many items, including lipstick, money, a cell phone, cough drops, chopsticks, and some pens.
16. It was the first of May; all the spring buds on the trees were starting to open.
17. It rained heavily during the afternoon; however, we managed to have our picnic anyway.