

The Writing Lab

Semicolons and Colons

Handout courtesy of Angela Gulick

Definitions and Examples of Semicolons (;)

1. A semicolon **separates two complete sentences** from each other much like a period/Capital letter or a comma/coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). Writers use semicolons when the two sentences are seen as particularly related to each other. Often, writers will put conjunctive adverbs (however, therefore, hence, consequently, essentially) in between the two sentences.

- I watched *The Daily Show* until 3:30 a.m.; **therefore**, I am absolutely exhausted today.
- A buffet can be a terrific bargain; **however**, the focus is probably on quantity, not quality.
- Owning pets offers many health benefits; **consequently**, pets can lower blood pressure and anxiety.

2. A semicolon is used when the writer presents a series of items that already have commas in them.

- I have lived in Council Bluffs, Iowa, Dubuque, Iowa, Ames, Iowa, Groton, Connecticut, Morris, Minnesota, Anchorage, Alaska, Urbana, Illinois, and Champaign, Illinois.
>>>In this example, the actual city/state divisions are unclear because of all the commas.
- I have lived in Council Bluffs, Iowa; Dubuque, Iowa; Ames, Iowa; Groton, Connecticut; Morris, Minnesota; Anchorage, Alaska; Urbana, Illinois; and Champaign, Illinois.
>>>In this example, the semicolons make the divisions between cities/states more clear.

Definitions and Examples of Colons (:)

A colon is primarily used to introduce a list of items. When a colon is used, however, an entire sentence must precede the colon.

- *Incorrect*: I am a big fan of 1970s singer/songwriters, **especially**: Carole King, James Taylor, Harry Chapin, Carly Simon, Neil Young, and John Fogerty.
- *Correct*: I am a big fan of 1970s singer/songwriters, especially Carole King, James Taylor, Harry Chapin, Carly Simon, and John Fogerty. (no colon)
- *Correct*: I am a big fan of 1970s singer/songwriters, especially **the following**: Carole King, James Taylor, Harry Chapin, Carly Simon, and John Fogerty. (complete sentence before :)
- *Incorrect*: Professional athletes have many responsibilities, **such as**: managing their time, listening to their teammates, and appreciating their fans.
- *Correct*: Professional athletes have many responsibilities, such as managing their time, listening to their teammates, and appreciating their fans. (no colon)
- *Correct*: Professional athletes have the following responsibilities: managing their time, listening to their teammates, and appreciating their fans. (complete sentence before :)