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Colons: An Explanation

What is a colon?

A colon is a form of punctuation consisting of two periods, one atop the other. Its purpose is to set up and draw the reader's attention to the ideas that come after it.

How can I use it correctly?

Colons have seven basic uses. Use them after an independent clause (an idea that can stand on its own as a complete sentence) to introduce the following:

- Independent clause (complete idea): a quote
- Independent clause (complete idea): a list
- Independent clause (complete idea): an appositive.*

Or, use them to punctuate

- A formal address
- Time
- Title and subtitle
- A scripture reference.

*An appositive is a statement that further explains the phrase or idea that precedes the colon. It provides another name for or description of a noun or pronoun.

Examples Using a Colon to Introduce a Quote

In his most famous soliloquy, Hamlet says: "To be, or not to be: that is the question."

Strong writing skills are important to career success: "It's difficult to get promoted if you don't write well," one employer says.

Examples Using a Colon to Introduce a List

The writing process involves five steps: pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading.

The tour includes the following cities: New York, Minneapolis, and San Francisco.

Examples Using a Colon to Introduce an Appositive

You have a choice: invest your money or put it in a savings account.

She was surprised when she saw her gift: a new puppy.

Angela was proud of her mother: CEO of a major company.

Example Using a Colon to Indicate a Formal or Business Address

Dear Ms. Smith:

Dear Sir or Madam:

Examples Using a Colon to Indicate Time

The train leaves at 3:47 p.m.

Did you say we'd meet at 5:15 to go to dinner?

Example Using a Colon to Indicate Title and Subtitle

The textbook for our class is called Ideas across Time: Classic and Contemporary Readings for Composition.

Example Using a Colon to Indicate Scripture References

Indicate the book of Luke, chapter 4, verse 7, like this: Luke 4:7.

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.).

Wrong: Her favorite subjects are: math and English.

Right: Her favorite subjects are math and English.

Wrong: The book's title is: *The Merchant of Venice*.

Right: The book's title is *The Merchant of Venice*.

Do not use a colon after a preposition.

Wrong: The movie was directed by: Steven Spielberg.

Right: The movie was directed by Steven Spielberg.

Wrong: Ice cream comes in many delicious flavors, such as: chocolate, vanilla, and bubble gum.

Right: Ice cream comes in many delicious flavors, such as chocolate, vanilla, and bubble gum.