



# The Writing Center



## Taking the Mystery Out of Semi-Colons, Colons, and Dashes

You may have avoided using these punctuation marks in the past, figuring that if you didn't use them, you couldn't mess them up. This sheet seeks to clarify these sometimes-confusing punctuation marks so that you can add them to your "toolkit" as a writer. Think of them as tools that affect the clarity, variety, and rhythm of your writing.

### The Semi-Colon: The California Rolling Stop

**\* Use the semi-colon between two complete sentences that are related.**

- Jaime made an appointment with the tutors; he needed help with his thesis statement.
- Crystal was shocked when she went to the bookstore; her math book cost over \$100.

**\*Use the semi-colon between two sentences linked by a transitional expression.**

- All of my friends had planned to take four courses this semester; however, because of budget cuts, they could only get into three.
- The parking is terrible during the first week; therefore, most students leave home an hour early at the beginning of the semester.

*Note that the semi-colon is positioned to separate the two sentences, even if the transition is shifted and "tucked in" to the second sentence.*

- All of my friends had planned to take four courses this semester; because of budget cuts, however, they could only get into three.
- The parking is terrible during the first week; most students, therefore, leave home an hour early at the beginning of the semester.

**\*Use semicolons to separate items in a series that is complicated by internal commas like the examples below. (This comes up very rarely in everyday writing.)**

- I have lived in Jacksonville, Florida; Atlantic Beach, Florida; Orono, Maine; San Jose, California; Ben Lomond, California; and Los Angeles, California.
- Popular science fiction sagas have included *Star Trek*, with Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock; *Star Wars*, with Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, and Princess Leia; and *Battlestar Galactica*, with its Cylon Raiders.

### Colons: More than Just the Time of Day

**\*Use a colon after a complete sentence that introduces a quotation.**

- Maya Angelou offers this advice on facing adversity: "If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude."

***\*Use a colon after a complete sentence to direct attention to a list.***

- We needed to purchase equipment for our camping trip: tents, sleeping bags, backpacks, and food for three days.
- She is taking the following courses: English 1A, Psychology 15, and Math 101.

***Avoid the following common errors with colons and lists, which are wrong because the colon does NOT come after a complete sentence. Do NOT use a colon after such as, including, or for example; no complete sentence would end with these words.***

- Wrong: Oaxaca's famous *mole* consists of several ingredients, including: tomatoes, a combination of spices, and chocolate.
- Wrong: I love all water activities, such as: swimming, snorkeling, and surfing.

***\*Use a colon after a complete sentence to direct attention to an appositive or an illustrative sentence.***

- My roommate has two irritating traits: messiness and an inability to be on time.
- In the driveway sat my dream car: a bright red restored Volkswagen bug.
- She suddenly realizes that this is a bad situation: she is alone, and he knows it.

## **Dashes: A Little Pizzazz**

***\*Use a dash (typed as two hyphens) to set off appositives that you want to emphasize.***

- Everything that I had planned—the elaborate dinner, the romantic music, the candlelit setting—was ruined by a bad case of food poisoning.
- My neighbor—a sullen 16-year-old who listens to loud heavy metal music all day—is driving me crazy.

***\*Use a dash to signal a dramatic shift in tone or thought.***

- I grilled the shrimp, lit the candles, put the music on low—and threw up in the corner.
- The pitcher glared at the batter, squinted at the catcher, wound up his pitch—and fell off the mound.