

SEMICOLONS, COLONS, AND DASHES

General note: Whenever you are considering what punctuation is appropriate for a specific sentence, think about the situation in this way. Punctuation marks have been developed to help us make up for the lack of voice intonation and body language in written communication. Punctuation marks themselves carry meaning and express relationships between ideas; thus it is important to select the punctuation mark that best expresses the relationship you have in mind. Punctuation itself may not always solve your problems, however. Sometimes sentences also need to be revised or completely rewritten.

THE SEMICOLON

The function (meaning) of the semicolon (;) is to bring together two separate but equal ideas. The most frequent use of the semicolon, therefore, is to join together two complete sentences that could stand alone. You use the semicolon to tell the reader that you see these two statements as closely related to each other.

Two separate but equal statements

The war went on for years. It caused great destruction.

These two statements joined together by a semicolon to form a compound sentence:

The war went on for years; it caused great destruction.

Note: There are only two proper ways to join together two sentences into a compound sentence:

a coordinating conjunction

or

a semicolon

for
and
nor
but

or
yet
so

;

Be aware that words like *thus*, *then*, *therefore*, *however* are NOT conjunctions (they are, actually, adverbs). Therefore, compound sentences that contain these words must have a semicolon (or, possibly, a coordinating conjunction) in order to be correct.

There are many causes of the Civil War; however, I will focus on the issue of slavery.

Another, less frequent use of the semicolon is to join separate but equal items in a series when separate items themselves contain commas.

The items:

- (1) the source, amount, and stability of income
- (2) the availability of insurance
- (3) monthly mortgage payments

The sentence:

Before we can help Mr. Smith, we must know the source, amount, and stability of his income; the availability of insurance; and his monthly mortgage payments.

THE COLON

The colon (:) tells your reader that you are now going to give us more concrete, specific information about a general idea you have introduced in a sentence.

Thus, the most obvious use of the colon is to introduce items in a list.

General idea:

We have many tasks to accomplish.

More concrete, specific information:

plan the party
invite the guests
buy the food

The sentence:

We have many tasks to accomplish: plan the party, invite the guests, buy the food.

But colons also introduce statements that restate a general idea in more concrete, specific terms.

General idea:

The Great Books have about them much more, I feel sure, than mere snob appeal.

Restatement in more concrete terms:

They have a kind of religious light, a sense of the Serious Call, of the medieval scholar-saint.

The sentence:

The Great Books have about them much more, I feel sure, than mere snob appeal:

they have a kind of religious light, a sense of the Serious Call, of the medieval scholar-saint.

Note: In sentences, colons should never be used to separate the subject/verb/object or complement, although you will occasionally see them used this way. In sentences, colons should come only after a complete sentence unit.

Avoid The main tasks before us are: to gather our data, brainstorm, and write our report.

Correct There are three main tasks before us: to gather our data, brainstorm, and write our report.

THE DASH

The em dash (--), which you create by typing two hyphen marks with no spaces before or after, is a versatile mark of punctuation which separates ideas while it also keeps them integrated in the sentence. Thus the dash has several uses:

1. The dash can set off concrete, specific information and hold it together as a unit when your statement of this information already contains commas.

Concrete, specific information:

faith, hope, and charity

General idea:

These virtues are central to a Christian life.

The sentence:

These virtues—faith, hope, and charity—are central to a Christian life.

2. In many cases the dash can be used in constructions that call for a colon (in the old days dashes were considered less formal than colons).

The central problem here is clear: inefficiency.

The central problem here is clear—inefficiency.

3. Since the dash separates the units on either side of it, it can prepare your reader for a dramatic shift of thought.

He was elegant, sophisticated, well educated—and boring.

There are other uses of the dash which you can learn about in handbooks, but here's a word of caution. Except in the most casual prose (a note to a friend, for example), the dash should not be used as a substitute for commas, periods, or semicolons.