

COLONS & SEMICOLONS

Colons

The first printed semicolon appeared in 1494, just two years after Columbus sailed to the New World and were adopted into English well before 1700.

In the 1800s, a weighted system was introduced: the comma being the lightest followed by the semicolon, the colon and, finally, the full stop.

A colon is nearly always preceded by a complete sentence and announces what is to come:

- Stuart has just one rule in life: never stop learning.
- I find fault with only three things in your proposal: the beginning, the middle and the end.

Colons introduce the part of a sentence that exemplifies, restates, elaborates, undermines, explains or balances the preceding part. They also have several formal introductory roles. They start lists (especially lists using semicolons):

- There are three things I hate in life: laziness; snobbery; and a lack of attention to detail.

They set off book and film sub-titles from the main titles:

- Gandhi II: The Mahatma Strikes Back

A colon is used as a kind of contrast between two antithetical or oppositional statements:

- Leaders lead: followers follow.

Colons separate dramatic characters from dialogue:

- STUART: The British now drink more coffee than tea.
- GEORGE CLOONEY: And it's all down to me!

Sentence – colon – phrase or word:

- “There are six rooms in the house: four upstairs and two downstairs.”
- “His success could be summed up in a word: luck.”

Semicolons

The main place for putting semicolons is between two related sentences where there is no conjunction such as ‘and’ or ‘but’, and where a comma would be ungrammatical:

- I loved Marathon chocolate bars; they are now called Snickers, of course.
- I will succeed; I will achieve my aims.

Linking words such as “however”, “nevertheless”, “also”, “consequently” and “hence” require a semicolon:

- He woke up in his own bed; nevertheless, he was nervous.

Lists where a comma is also used:

- A uniform consists of a skirt or trousers; a grey, white or blue shirt; a jumper; shoes...

Difference between a colon and a semicolon:

- Stuart locked himself in the shed; England lost to Germany. (semicolon)

This suggests that the events occurred at the same time. Stuart may have locked himself in the shed because he couldn’t bear to watch the match, although this is not certain.

- Stuart locked himself in the shed: England lost to Germany. (colon)

All is now clear. Stuart locked himself in the shed *because* England lost to Germany.

Extracts from: **Eats, shoots & leaves**, Lynne Truss, 2003. Profile books Ltd.