**COLONS**

A colon usually announces that the writer is about to say something in particular. That “something” is often a list or a quotation, although not all lists and quotations can follow a colon. Except in its special uses (below), a colon can only follow an independent clause.

■ Colons with Lists

Use a colon to introduce a list when the words in front of it could stand alone as a full sentence (an independent clause) that could otherwise end with a period. The number of items in the list doesn’t matter. The end of the list should be the end of the sentence.

- **There are three primary colors**: red, yellow, and blue.
- **In front of the house I saw it parked**: a shiny red convertible.
- **We had a busy morning**: we took the dog to the groomer’s, we washed the car, we shopped for school supplies, and we pruned all the flower bushes.

■ Colons with Quotations

Use a colon to introduce a quotation when the words in front of it could stand alone as a full sentence (an independent clause) that could otherwise end with a period.

- **He gave his son boring, familiar advice**: “neither a borrower nor a lender be.”

■ Colons in Ordinary Sentences

Use a colon to connect full sentences (independent clauses) that could otherwise end with a period when the second clause explains or summarizes the first.

- I hated the house: its rooms were dark and tiny.
- I’d gone to every class, done all the reading, met with my tutor, and read over my notes every night: I knew I was prepared.

■ Special Uses of the Colon

Use a colon after the salutation in a formal letter.

Dear Senator Craig:

Use a colon to indicate hours and minutes.

Class begins at 9:30 a.m.

Use a colon to show proportions.

The ratio of syrup to water is 1:4.

Use colons when writing out the full title or publication information of a book, movie, or other work. One colon goes between the title and subtitle; another goes between city and publisher.

The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King.

New York: The Seabury Press.
Misuses of the Colon

Because a colon can only follow an independent clause, it cannot be used

After **such as, including, or for example**

*(wrong) We have many toppings, for example: olives, anchovies, and peppers.*

Between a verb and its object or complement.

*(wrong) In a rage, Casey threw: the book, the phone, and the pillow.*

Between a preposition and its object.

*(wrong) I’m going to the party with: Celina, Maricela, and Ellie.*

If a colon introduces a list, the sentence cannot continue after the list is finished.

*(wrong) Casey packed everything: the meat, the eggs, and the fruit, and put the picnic basket in the car.*

Practice

Add or remove colons wherever necessary.

1. There are two kinds of people in the world: those who divide the world into two groups and those who don’t.
2. I.S.U.’s motto is: Veritas Vos Liberabit, “the truth will make you free.”
3. Idaho offers many outdoor activities such as fishing, skiing, and hiking.
4. I live by Oscar Wilde’s advice: “The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it.”
5. The radio was playing her favorite Elvis songs: “Kentucky Rain” and “Blue Suede Shoes.”
6. When you go to the store, don’t forget to get toothpaste, orange juice, and dog food.
7. She plays three instruments: the fiddle, the mandolin, and the recorder.
8. Her many attempts had one thing in common: complete failure.
9. We saw daffodils, apple blossoms, and lambs in the fields: spring is here.
10. Thomas Jefferson observed: “The harder I work, the more luck I seem to have.”

Answers

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