

# The Colon

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The colon has a number of uses. It always **introduces**, and it **draws attention** to what it introduces. For that reason, it is a strong punctuation mark: do not use it too often.

1. The colon itself announces that a list is coming, so it is never used with words or phrases that do the same job— words or phrases like *comprising*, *such as*, *including*. Here are three examples of INCORRECT colon use:

*His favourite junk foods are: peanuts, chips and tacos.* [The verb *are* does not require a mark. The foods are completions of the verb.]

*Her bag always contained a variety of items for school such as: pens, heavy books, and piles of half-completed assignments.* [The phrase *such as* serves to introduce the list.]

*The furnishings of the basement apartment consisted of: a table with three chairs, an old sofa, a bean bag chair and a bed.* [The words *consisted of* tell us a list is coming, so no colon is needed.]

Here are the corrections of the faulty sentences above:

--*His favourite junk foods are peanuts, chips and tacos.*

--*Her bag always contained items she needed for class: pens, heavy books, and piles of half-completed assignments.*

--*The furnishings of the basement apartment consisted of a table with three chairs, an old sofa, a beanbag chair and a bed.*

**An important test of a correctly used colon is that the sentence that it comes at the end of must be an independent clause.**

2. The colon can be used to **join two independent clauses**. But note that when the colon is used, the first clause always introduces the second. The colon draws attention to the second clause.

--*The reason she does well at sports is easy to explain: she focuses on her goals and she practices every day.*

*--Politicians claim they want young people to participate: younger voters are only interested in open, honest politics.*

NOTE: A semi-colon could be used in place of the colon in the above examples, but note that the semi-colon simply joins two independent clauses. The colon joins an initial independent clause to another independent clause that concludes and points out its meaning.

3. The colon can be used to introduce a phrase that elaborates on the first part the sentence.

*--Working at a boring part-time job, he thought of one thing only: tuition fees.*

*--I have decided not to attend UBC: Capilano University has offered me an entrance scholarship.*

*--The "Iphone" is newest product that everybody wants: Apple is a ground-breaking technology company.*

*--The car came with expensive options: a sunroof, heated seats, a disk player, and bag.*

*--It is a good idea to have virus protection: hackers are everywhere on the net.*

4. The colon can be used to introduce a quotation:

*--Pierre Trudeau once made the following remark: "The state has no business in the bedrooms of the nation."*

In essays, the colon can be used to tie a critical quotation or a textual illustration to your own text if your text does not already contain introductory words or phrases:

*--K-Os admits, in "Man I Used to Be," that moral decisions are not easy to fulfil: "Things that I said I wouldn't do, I did 'em."*

Often, the colon is used to introduce long quotations in essays. Remember, if the grammar of your sentence does not require a colon you should not use one; not all quotations are introduced by colons.