



SEMICOLONS, COLONS, & DASHES

Semicolons, colons, and dashes are confusing for many writers, but they're really easy to understand once you realize that they're very different forms of punctuation. Semicolons and colons, for instance, look a lot alike, but they signal completely different things (semicolons usually connect whole sentences while colons introduce specific bits of information). Dashes have many different uses, but they always have an informal quality. None of these punctuation marks should be overused. A good academic writer can often get along just fine using mostly periods, commas, and quotation marks.

SEMICOLONS

If you know how to use periods, you already know almost everything about how to use semicolons too. **Most semicolons work grammatically like periods, slipping in between two complete sentences.** The difference is that periods *separate* two sentences; semicolons *connect* them. Semicolons tell your reader that the two sentences on either side speak to each other or are part of the same idea. Whether to use a period or semicolon depends completely on context, but here are some possible examples:

We couldn't have avoided the accident if we had tried; the road was oily, it was raining, and our brakes locked up.

There really are no hard and fast rules about writing; everybody discovers a process that works best for him or her.

Frequently you'll see a semicolon acting as a hinge between two parallel sentences, but this is just a variation on the same theme:

Some people love cold weather; others like it sunny and hot.

Whether to use a period or a semicolon in these cases is completely up to you as the writer. Use a semicolon when you want to communicate to your readers that they should read the next sentence as extending the ideas in the previous sentence.

There's another, less common use for semicolons. Sometimes semicolons can function as a means for breaking up or clarifying a sentence that's extremely long or that has several phrases or clauses that could potentially get muddled or confused. Think of these semicolons functioning as a kind of "heavier" version of the comma:

We went to the store and bought hot dogs, hamburgers, and chicken; chips, pretzels, and potato salad; and ice cream, cookies, and chocolate cake.

But this case is rare. Remember the basic rule: **semicolons do exactly the same thing (grammatically, not semantically) that periods do:**

COLONS

Colons introduce specific information. Oftentimes the specific information comes in the form of a list of things, but it doesn't have to. The most important rule to remember is that the sentence coming **before** the colon should be a complete sentence that sets the reader up to expect the specific information:

There's one food I just can't stand: lima beans.

There were three main reasons I chose to attend IUP: my athletic scholarship, encouragement from the coach, and their outstanding record over the last five years.

Colons have a much narrower usefulness than semicolons. Try to remember the basic pattern: general information comes on the left side of the colon, and specific information comes on the right. The preceding sentence should excite a kind of expectation in the reader that he or she will learn some specific data, which will come after the colon. Don't add a colon when the specific data is already a part of the previous sentence:

At the store, we bought cookies, chocolate, and strawberries.

DASHES

Dashes are by far the trickiest of punctuation marks because they can perform the same grammatical function as several others—commas, parentheses, semicolons, colons, even periods. As follows:

Dashes can be used in pairs, like commas and parentheses, to set off an inserted comment in a sentence:

The IUP Writing Center — located in 218 Eicher Hall — offers tutorial services to all undergraduate and graduate students at IUP.

At summer camp — I was twelve, I think — I broke my arm.

Compare: “At summer camp (I was twelve, I think) I broke my arm.” **Parentheses** signal that the enclosed material is very much separate from, even extraneous to the rest of the sentence. **Dashes** indicate that the material is more important than that but less important or less integral than it would be if it had been set off by a pair of commas.

Dashes can set off and emphasize material at the end of a sentence, like colons or a comma:

I learned a lot about punctuation by reading and writing — but I also keep my grammar handbook right next to my computer.

There's really only one more thing to do — sweep the garage.

Dashes can mark a sudden shift in mood, idea, or tone:

We were on our way — but we sure weren't happy about it.

Essentially, dashes fill in for other forms of punctuation when you want a less formal tone or when you want to set off or emphasize a piece of the sentence.

Note: Don't confuse dashes with hyphens — dashes and hyphens are way more different even than colons are from semicolons. Hyphens affect words — they turn two words into a single idea (for example, *part-time*). Dashes affect whole sentences and clauses. Remember that dashes are made with two hyphens stuck right together, with no space before or after. Get used to typing hyphens (-) and dashes (--) differently, and you'll be less likely to confuse the two. Certain writing programs – like Microsoft Word – will combine those dashes automatically.

Always proofread, revise, and, when possible, talk with a tutor about your writing and grammar.