



Using Semicolons, Colons and Dashes

A good academic writer can often get along just fine using mostly periods, commas, and quotation marks, but occasionally a sentence may call for a semicolon, colon, or dash. Let's look at each one.

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 by 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.

Sometimes 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.

There's a 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.

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

Colons

Colons introduce specific information. Oftentimes the information comes in the form of a list of things, but it doesn't have to. The sentence coming before the colon should be a complete sentence that sets the reader up to expect the 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 the team's outstanding record over the last five years.

Don't add a colon when the information is already a part of the previous sentence:

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

The Writing Center

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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. Let's look at a few examples.

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.

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.

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 very different. 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.