Success Center
Directed Learning Activity (DLA)

Punctuation 4:
How to Use Colons

G034.1
Directed Learning Activity – How to Use Colons

Description: This Directed Learning Activity (DLA) is designed to teach you the basic rules for using a colon. Good punctuation is crucial for successful academic writing. Many students use little punctuation in their essays beyond commas and periods. But to be restricted to just two forms of punctuation when writing your essay is like building a house using only a hammer and a saw: you can do it; but not very well. By learning to use more of the available forms of punctuation, like colons, you will be able to communicate and express your ideas more clearly and effectively.

Prior Knowledge: No prior knowledge is necessary, but it would be helpful to know the definition of an appositive. Appositives function somewhat as adjectives do; they describe a noun or pronoun by renaming it. For example, “Mr. Smith, my English professor, just wrote a book on grammar.” The phrase my English professor is an appositive because it renames Mr. Smith.

Step One: Assessing Prior Knowledge
On the lines below, explain what you already know about colons. Don’t look ahead or use other sources of information. Try and write something down, but if you don’t know anything about colons, then write that you don’t know.

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Step Two: Understanding the Uses of Colons
The colon is one of the easiest and most helpful punctuation marks to use. You don’t have to remember six or seven rules to understand how a colon works. In prose, a colon really does only one thing: it introduces. It can introduce anything: a word, a phrase, a sentence, a quotation, or a list. Carefully read the explanations and examples below before attempting these techniques yourself in the practice exercises.

Tina has only one thing on her mind: Matthew.
Tina has only one thing on her mind: getting a date with Matthew.
Tina has only one thing on her mind: she wants to go out with Matthew.
Tina has three things on her mind: school, work, and Matthew.

1. Use a colon to introduce a list.
When introducing a list, a colon must follow a complete sentence. What you write before the colon must be able to stand on its own as an independent clause. Do not place a colon after a
verb when introducing a list. The verb itself introduces the list, so the colon would be redundant. For example, you would not write:

   My favorite friends are: Evelyn, Mary, and Sandra.

The colon is not needed in the sentence above because the verb does the work of introducing the three friends. It would be better to write:

   I have three favorite friends: Evelyn, Mary, and Sandra.

Or

   My favorite friends are Evelyn, Mary, and Sandra. [no colon]

Here are some other examples:

   You must bring the following items on the camp out: sleeping bag, warm clothing, and good hiking shoes.

   I want an assistant who can do the following: type letters, design web pages, and make coffee.

   A number of unexpected problems cropped up: the orders didn’t go out on time, there was some miscommunication with the branch offices, and our top salesman was recruited by another company.

Practice 1: Add colons as needed in the sentences below.

1. This dessert requires only three ingredients graham crackers, marshmallows, and chocolate chips.

2. James left the carnival loaded down with treats cotton candy, stuffed toys, balloons, and three live goldfish.

3. The major holidays for the upcoming academic year are as follows Labor Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year’s Day, and Memorial Day.

4. The children were asked to bring certain supplies the next day crayons, scissors, glue, glitter, and ribbon.

2. Use a colon to introduce a word, phrase, or clause that acts as an appositive.

   Remember that an appositive describes another noun by renaming it. A colon is used to amplify the appositive. It gives special emphasis to whatever follows it because readers must first come to a stop, and so they pay more attention to it. For example, let’s say you are
describing a product, and you want to emphasize above all that this product, a John Deere lawn mower, is reliable. You could write:

*The John Deere lawn mower beats its competitors, especially in the key area of reliability.*

While this sentence gets the point across, it doesn’t place much emphasis on reliability. A sentence using a colon is much more emphatic.

*The John Deere lawn mower beats its competitors, especially in one key area: reliability.*

This second sentence does a much better job of conveying the message that the John Deere lawn mower is above all reliable.

Here are some other examples:

*I know the perfect job for her: a politician.
[politician renames the perfect job]*

*Her goal was easily stated: the state championship.
[the state championship renames her goal]*

*My roommate is guilty of two of the seven deadly sins: gluttony and laziness.
[gluttony and laziness renames two of the seven deadly sins]*

*This year, Tom’s old obsession has been replaced with a new one: jazz.
[jazz renames a new one and tells us what Tom’s new obsession is]*

*Never overlook the most important rule: never argue with the boss.
[never argue with the boss renames the most important rule]*

**Practice 2: Add colons as needed in the sentences below.**

1. By the end of her first date with Bill, Julie was positive of one thing there would never be a second.

2. Instead of the anger he expected, Darryl felt only one emotion when his son was brought home by the police: great relief.

3. There is one thing a human being simply cannot live without: hope.

4. I finally found the perfect food: chocolate!

**3. Use a colon between independent clauses if the second clause summarizes or explains the first.**
A colon is used to introduce an idea that is an explanation or continuation of the one that comes before the colon. The colon can be considered as a gateway inviting the reader to go on. Look at these examples:

**Ben suddenly canceled his evening plans for a simple reason: his car was out of gas.**

*his car was out of gas explains why Ben canceled his plans*

**I know the answer: reverse the two equations.**

*reverse the two equations explains or summarizes the answer*

**Let me emphasize one point: I do not accept late papers.**

*I do not accept late papers explains the point*

**It was becoming painfully obvious to him: he was being ignored.**

*he was being ignored explains what was becoming obvious to him*

**We had to cancel the party: too many people were sick.**

*too many people were sick explains why we had to cancel the party*

In the above examples, you have some idea of what will come after the colon. It is important to note that the clause that comes before the colon must be able to stand alone and make complete sense on its own.

**Notes on Punctuation:**

a. When using a colon to introduce a list or an appositive, use a lowercase letter after the colon.

   *The students were divided into two groups: residents and commuters.*

b. When the colon introduces a clause, there is some disagreement over the rules. However, most writers agree that if the independent clause after the colon is a formal quote, you should begin the quote with a capital letter. Also, use a capital if you have more than one sentence after the colon. Otherwise, it’s up to you as to whether you capitalize the first word of the clause or not. Just be consistent with your choice.

4. **The colon can also be used to introduce quoted material.**

   Again, the colon must follow a complete sentence. Look at these examples:

   *The director often used her favorite quotation from Monty Python: “I wasn’t expecting the Spanish Inquisition.”*
   *Mae West had one golden rule for handling men: “Tell the pretty ones they’re smart, and tell the smart ones they’re pretty.”*

   *Whitehead has this to say about writing style: “Style is the ultimate morality of mind.”* Remember, you should begin a quote with a capital letter if the colon precedes a quote.
Practice 3: Add colons as needed in the sentences below.

1. Frederick expresses his concern about heart disease “Deaths from heart disease in America will increase five-fold in the next twenty years.”

2. The scenario for the crime was an old one the butler killed the master in the library with a candlestick.

3. Theresa became the woman we thought she would become she won an Olympic gold medal and found a cure for cancer.

4. The teacher concluded with this statement “Anyone caught cheating will fail my class.”

5. But here’s the interesting thing he doesn’t like his boss.

6. The situation is clear if you have unprotected sex with a stranger, you risk AIDS.

7. The poem closes with a question “If winter comes, can spring be far behind?”

8. After a sleepless night, the senator made her decision she would not seek re-election.

5. Use a colon after the salutation in a formal or business letter, report, memo, or other type of business communication.

   Dear Sir or Madam:
   Dear Judge Wright:
   Attention Union Members:
   To the Research Staff:
   To All Managers:

   You would also use a colon to separate the chapter and verse in the Bible; indicate hours, minutes, and seconds; show proportions; separate a title and subtitle; and separate the publication location and the publisher.

   Exodus 2:3-5
   5:30 p.m.
   A winning time of 3:43:02
   New York: Basic Books
   The ratio of women to men was 2:1.
   Eyewitness Books: Ancient Rome
Step Three: Editing for Colon Errors

Now that you have learned the rules, it’s time to apply that knowledge to writing. When you write an essay, you must always edit for mistakes. That means critically looking at your grammar and punctuation and correcting any mistakes you have made. The practice exercises in Step Three are meant to help you learn how to edit comma errors.

Practice 1: Put a checkmark next to the sentences that are punctuated correctly. There is only one correct sentence in each set.

1. ____ The potion contained: fruit, biscuits, and glue.
   ____ The potion contained fruit, biscuits, and glue.
   ____ The potion contained a pot full of: fruit, biscuits, and glue.

2. ____ You have only one choice: leave now while you can.
   ____ You have only one choice leave now while you can.
   ____ You have only one choice, leave now while you can.

3. ____ I can see only one thing: the old lighthouse.
   ____ I can see only one thing the old lighthouse.
   ____ I can see: only one thing the old lighthouse.

4. ____ In the bag were: scissors, a hairbrush, and her address book.
   ____ In the bag were the following: scissors, a hairbrush, and her address book.
   ____ In the bag there were: scissors, a hairbrush, and her address book.

5. ____ Mankind has only one choice left stop burning fossil fuels.
   ____ Mankind has only one choice, left stop burning fossil fuels.
   ____ Mankind has only one choice left: stop burning fossil fuels.

6. ____ I have only one thing to say to you: “Get off my land.”
   ____ I have only one thing to say to you “Get off my land.”
   ____ I have only one thing to say to you, “Get off my land.”

Practice 2: Look at the following sentences. Determine if the colon is used correctly in each sentence. If it is, write OK. If the sentence is wrong, correct it by adding or deleting a colon.

Examples:

*The potion contained some exotic ingredients: snails’ eyes, bats’ wings, and garlic.*  OK

*The magic potion contained: sesame seeds, bran flakes, and coleslaw.*  OK

[This second sentence is wrong. Colons introduce lists, but they be placed after a complete sentence. *The magic potion contained* is not a complete sentence. To correct this sentence, you need to take the colon out.]
1. He went to the store for butter and came back with four other items: bread, apples, gum, and soda.

2. Jeremy demonstrated his maturity: he chose not to yell at his mom.

3. A toy is not only for entertainment: it also develops fine motor and social skills.

4. I have only one reason to continue in my marriage: my children.

5. I want you to tell me one thing: the truth.

6. Francine felt a rush of emotion when the door opened: James was home from his trip.

7. The teacher’s heavy bag contained only the essentials: books, exams, and handouts.

8. Consider the words of John F. Kennedy: “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”

9. The very best peaches are: those that are grown in the great state of Georgia.

10. Fran Lebowitz has this advice for parents: “Never allow your child to call you by your first name. He hasn’t known you long enough.”

11. There is one thing that he will not accept: stupidity.

12. My favorite cake is made of: carrots, flour, butter, eggs, and cream cheese icing.

13. He worked toward one objective: a degree.

14. Life is like a puzzle: half the fun is in trying to work it out.

15. My roommate gave me the things I needed most: companionship and quiet.

Step Four: Assessing What You Have Learned

On the lines below, write down what you learned about colons. Try to express it in your own words.

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For Further Practice:

If you want more practice using colons, go to The Learning Center’s Online Writing Lab at: http://depts.dyc.edu/learningcenter/owl/exercises/colons_ex1.htm.
Tutor Feedback:

_____ The student can define **appositive** (a word or phrase that describes a noun or pronoun by renaming it) and can explain the primary use of a **colon** (to introduce elements).

_____ In Step Two, the student correctly inserted colons into sentences with lists, appositives, explanations/summaries, and quotations.

_____ In Step Three, the student identified which sentences correctly used colons and which ones did not. The student then was able to correct those sentences by inserting a colon or taking one out.

_____ In Step Four, the student was able to articulate in writing the different uses of a colon.

Additional Comments: _____________________________________________________________
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PRINT INSTRUCTOR/TUTOR NAME ____________________________ DATE __________

INSTRUCTOR/TUTOR SIGNATURE ___________________________

**STUDENT – DO NOT FORGET TO TURN THIS SHEET IN AT THE FRONT DESK!**

*You may not get credit for completing this DLA if you fail to leave this sheet with the front desk receptionist.*