

Seven Rules of Colons

Rule #1 Series or List

Use a colon to start a series/list that is introduced by an independent clause.

Examples:

There are three types of people in the world: those who can count and those who can't.
In the drawer I found two things: a letter and a yellow notebook.

Rule #2 Consequence of an Action

Use a colon to introduce the effect or logical consequence of an action.

Examples:

The test was in three minutes: I had to run to class.
The evidence could only mean one thing: the butler was guilty.

Rule #3 Quotation

Use a colon before a long quotation that is an independent clause. In MLA Format, the quote should be four or more lines long.

Examples:

Han Solo remarked: "I've seen a lot of strange stuff, but I've never seen anything to make me believe there's one all powerful force controlling everything. There's no mystical energy field controlling my destiny. It's all a lot of simple tricks and nonsense."

Rule #4 Letter or Memo

Use a colon after the salutation in a business letter or memo.

Examples:

Dear Dr. Brown:
To the California Board of Education:

Rule #5 Separating Chapter and Verse

Use a colon to separate the chapter and verse in religious scripture.

Examples:

Let's look at Hebrews 11:7.
Open to the Surah al-Baqarah 02:83.

Rule #6 Separating Hours and Minutes

Use a colon to separate hours from minutes when stating the time.

Examples:

Class starts at 1:00, not 2:30.
I'll be there at 3:15 because of the traffic.

Rule #7 Ratios

Use a colon to show a ratio.

Examples:

If you use eggs and milk at a 2:1 ratio, the pancakes will turn out great.
The course has a 1:3 lecture-to-practice ratio.

Three Rules of Semicolons

Rule #1 Joining Independent Clauses

Use a semicolon to join two closely related independent clauses which are not joined by a coordinating conjunction.

Examples:

The dog buried his bone in the backyard; he returned the next day to dig it up.

I hate salad; she loves salad.

My father always let me go to the park when I finished my homework; my friend's father did not.

Rule #2 Joining Independent Clauses with a Conjunctive Adverb (Transition Word)

Use a semicolon and comma to join two closely related independent clauses with a conjunctive adverb (however, therefore, in fact).

Examples:

The dog buried his bone in the backyard; then, he returned the next day to dig it up.

I hate salad; however, she loves salad.

My father always let me go to the park when I finished my homework; conversely, my friend's father did not.

Rule #3 Series or List where Commas would be Confusing

Use a semicolon to separate items in a series/list containing items that already have commas.

Examples:

Letter, Number Sets: The answers to the test are 1, D; 2, B; 3, A; 4, D; 5, C; and 6, A.

Noun, Description Sets: The winners were surprising: Amy, who placed last during the first test; Connor, who was sick for most of the semester; and Tamar, who has been sleeping through practice recently.

City, State Sets: Mary has lived in Los Angeles, California; Seattle, Washington; and Portland, Oregon.