colons

The colon is a punctuation mark which suggests a logical connection. By using one, you help your reader anticipate explanation, elaboration, and enumeration. This handout will help you use colons correctly.

**General Rules**

**Use Colons after Complete Sentences**

Place colons after complete sentences: sentences containing both a subject and a complete verb.

- **Incorrect:** My favorite movies are: Apocalypse Now, Star Wars, and It's a Wonderful Life.
- **Correct:** I have three favorite movies: Apocalypse Now, Star Wars, and It’s a Wonderful Life.

*Note:* “My favorite movies are” is not a complete sentence, so the colon is used incorrectly. “I have three favorite movies” is a complete sentence and needs a colon.

Using a colon after forms of the verb “be” (e.g., “are,” “is,” “were,” etc.), after prepositions, or after the phrase “such as” creates an incomplete sentence. In these cases, a colon is not needed. Leave it out.

- **Incorrect:** The three principal causes of breakups are: fear, narcissism, and idealism.
- **Correct:** The three principal causes of breakups are fear, narcissism, and idealism.

*Note:* Placing the colon after “are” creates an incomplete sentence. The colon is unnecessary.

- **Incorrect:** My father is the best at: cooking, singing, and storytelling.
- **Correct:** My father is the best at cooking, singing, and storytelling.

*Note:* Placing the colon after “at” (a preposition) creates an incomplete sentence. The colon is unnecessary.

- **Incorrect:** She has many hobbies, such as: juggling, jogging, and jigging.
- **Correct:** She has many hobbies, such as juggling, jogging, and jigging.

*Note:* Placing the colon after “such as” creates an incomplete sentence. The colon is unnecessary.

**Colons and Capitalization**

If the clause following the colon is a complete sentence, it should begin with a capital letter. If it is not a complete sentence, do not capitalize it.

**Complete sentence:** The teacher loved to make his classes entertaining: One day he came to class dressed as Abraham Lincoln.
Incomplete sentence: Alex has two dogs: a St. Bernard and a Chihuahua.

Colons and Other Punctuation

Place colons outside of parentheses, quotation marks, and other punctuation.

Incorrect: It is easy to understand why Baltimore is called “Charm City.” Its attractions and friendly residents make the city a great place to live.

Correct: It is easy to understand why Baltimore is called “Charm City”: Its attractions and friendly residents make the city a great place to live.

Common Uses

Explanations or Definitions

When you use a colon, you signal to your reader that the following information will define or expand upon the previous sentence.

Example: The evening news issued a winter weather advisory: Heavy snowfall and subzero temperatures are expected tonight.

Example: Jimmy was delighted to see his birthday present: a new bike.

Lists

Colons also introduce lists after complete sentences.

Example: The menu includes three kinds of dessert: pie, cake, and ice cream.

Quotations

Colons can be used after a complete sentence to set up a quotation.

Example: We must never forget the words of Martin Luther King Jr.: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Salutations

In business letters, colons are used after the salutation. In this case, they do not follow a complete sentence.

Example: Dear Ms. Smith:

Subtitles

Colons are used to separate the title and subtitle of a work. This is another case where the colon does not need to follow a complete sentence.

Example: The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King

Example: Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers

References

