

Semicolons and Colons

Need to know:

- An independent clause is a phrase that contains a subject and verb (forms a complete sentence).
- A dependent clause is a phrase that does NOT contain a subject and a verb.
 - Dependent clauses must be reworded or attached to an independent clause to form a complete sentence. Dependent clauses cannot stand alone.
- Semicolons and colons join two clauses together.

When should you use a semicolon?

Semicolons connect two clauses that can stand alone.

“I’m not hungry; therefore, I’d rather not go to dinner with you.”

→ This sentence uses a semicolon and transition words (such as consequently, however, and moreover) to connect the two independent clauses.

“I don’t want to go to dinner with you tonight; I’m not hungry.”

→ This sentence uses a semicolon to connect two independent clauses without a transition word. Notice that the sentences are related (in idea).

“After the vote, our school colors will be either red, white and blue; green and gold; or marigold, chartreuse, and eggshell.”

→ This sentence separates a dependent clause from an independent clause.

◆ Semicolons are also used to replace commas in a list that already contains commas.

When should you use a colon?

Colons are less common in academic writing, but there are a few times when a colon is necessary. These are the three most common use cases.

“I do know this: that child is not my son.”

→ To introduce a second, closely related independent clause when it explains the first part of the sentence.

“You can count on two things in life: death and taxes.”

→ To introduce a list after an independent clause. Imagine the colon is saying “that is.”

“The Gettysburg Address is often quoted: ‘Four score and seven years ago...’”

→ To introduce a quotation.