

Colons

A colon (:) is a punctuation mark used to introduce a list, an explanation, an example, or a quotation. It is also used in the greeting of a business letter.

Usages

1. Use a colon to introduce a list of items **after a complete sentence**.

Incorrect:

The Greek orders are: Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian.

Correct:

The Ancient Greeks developed three architectural systems called orders: Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian.

2. Never use a colon after a verb, preposition, or any transitional item.

Incorrect:

After school you should: go to the store, see the art exhibit, and do your homework.

Correct:

After school, you should do three things: go to the store, see the art exhibit, and do your homework.

3. Use a colon to join two related independent clauses when **the second clause is providing explanation or being given emphasis**. You may capitalize the first letter of the first word that follows the colon if the second clause is independent, but this choice depends on context.

Incorrect:

Stanley forgot one important detail about the safe: Jim likes to play baseball.

(The two clauses are unrelated; baseball has nothing to do with the safe.)

Correct:

Stanley forgot one important detail about the safe: it locks automatically when you close it.

(The two clauses are related. The second clause provides explanation for the first.)

4. Use a colon to introduce a direct quote.

Example:

The lecturer offered an honest sound bite to the audience: “If you want to make a difference, you must take a risk.”

5. Use a colon to follow the greeting of a formal business letter even when addressing the person by his or her first name.

Examples:

Dear Dr. Jones:

Dear Sarah:

Activity

Change the following phrases or sentences to incorporate colons properly.

1. Send application materials to: 1648 Mariposa St, New York, NY 1003.
2. To Whom It May Concern
3. The presenters at the 2012 symposium included: an architect, an entrepreneur, and a bio-medical engineer.
4. The factors contributing to childhood obesity include: diet, exercise habits, and genetic background.
5. Sally could not speak. She was stunned.

Answer Key for Activity

1. Send application materials to this address: 1648 Mariposa St, New York, NY 10003.
2. To Whom It May Concern:
3. The 2012 symposium included a variety of successful presenters: an architect, an entrepreneur, and a bio-medical engineer.
4. There are three main factors contributing to childhood obesity: diet, exercise habits, and genetic background.
5. Sally could not speak: she was stunned.

References

Driscoll, Dana Lynn and Morgan Sousa. “Brief Overview of Punctuation.” *Purdue Online*

Writing Lab. Purdue University, 2011. Web.

Straus, Jane. “Colons.” *GrammarBook.com*. n.d. Web.