

Colons, Semicolons, and Dashes-Oh my!

Punctuation can be fun! The following are three different types of punctuation that you can use to add style and meaning to your writing. Understanding these three forms of punctuation will give you new tools which can give your writing new flare and style.

1. Colons (:)

The colon is used when you want to add more specific information that explains the preceding clause. Colons are most commonly used before items in a list. They are also used to state what you said in a more concrete way. *The main rule when you use a colon is that the part that comes before the colon must be an independent clause-it has to form a complete thought on its own.*

Examples:

"There are three types of punctuation you will learn to use today: colons, semicolons, and dashes."

This is an example of a list related to the independent clause before the colon.

"There is one thing I hope for you by the end of this workshop: that you feel comfortable using these new punctuations."

This is an example of a statement that explains the statement before. (Note that the clause after the colon is not a complete thought. This is fine as long as the clause before the colon forms a complete thought.)

Avoid statements like this:

"The one thing I hope for you is: that you will feel comfortable using these new punctuations."

The statement before the colon in this example does not form a complete thought. This is not correct.

2. Semicolons (;)

The semicolon is used to bring two separate but related ideas together. *The main rule with the semicolon is that both statements must form a complete thought on its own.* Another less common use of the semicolon is to separate items in a series that contain commas in themselves.

Examples:

"It's raining out; the air outside is cold."

Both statements form a complete thought. "It's raining out," and "the air outside is cold" could both be written as sentences ending with a period.

"To become good at punctuation, I must understand, practice, and experiment with them; make mistakes; and learn from these mistakes."

"I must read Collapse; Guns, Germs, and Steel; and The Third Chimpanzee for my sociology class."

This is the less common use of the semicolon: to separate list items that already have commas in them.

3. Dashes (-)

A dash (an *em* dash, to be more specific) is a mark that separates ideas while keeping them a part of the sentence. Sometimes the dash can be used in place of a colon, but the dash should not be used in place of commas, semicolons, or periods. The dash can also be used to separate a dramatic shift in ideas.

Examples:

“My three favorite punctuations-colons, semicolons, and dashes-aren’t really that hard to use once you get the hang of it.”

This example uses the dash to insert the statement “colons, semicolons, and dashes” into the sentence “My three favorite punctuations aren’t that hard to use once you get the hang out it.”

“The problem was clear-I forgot to drink my morning coffee.”

This is a situation where the sentence could also have been written with a colon. “The problem was clear: I forgot to drink my morning coffee.”

“The painting was vibrant, colorful-and very ugly.”

This example represents a dramatic shift from the ideas that give off a positive connotation to one that is rather negative.