

COLONS, SEMICOLONS AND DASHES

(Fine, Edith H. & Josephson, Judith P. (1998). Nitty-Gritty Grammar. Ten Speed Press.)

COLONS (:) are arrows or road signs. They are more formal, signaling that a list, explanation, or long quotation follows. Put one space after a colon. Use colons:

- **To introduce a list.**
Mike's luncheon menu includes these items: caviar, biscuits, anchovies and spinach quiche.
- **With a greeting in a business letter.**
Dear Ms. Pocketwrench:
- **Before an explanation, even if it forms a short sentence.**
Understanding the opposite sex is impossible: Men and women think differently.
(Don't forget! Be sure that the information before the colon is a complete sentence!)
- **With direct quotations or if a complete sentence follows the colon. (These are the only times you will use a capital letter after the colon.)**
When it comes to the stock market, I stick to this maxim: "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread."
(Capital letter on "Fools" – it begins a quotation.)
Our course is clear: Proceed first to the chocolate box.
(Capital letter on "Proceed" – it begins a complete sentence.)
(Don't forget! Be sure that the information before the colon is a complete sentence!)

SEMICOLONS (;) are flashing red lights. They make readers apply the brakes before going on. Put one space after a semicolon. Use semicolons:

- **To link two closely related thoughts.**
Of course my stomach's rumbling; it's lunchtime.
- **To separate two main clauses.**
Many criminals leave clues; detectives follow the trail.
(You could also turn these two thoughts into separate sentences, or link them with a conjunction.)
- **To separate a list of items that already includes commas, such as names and titles or cities and states.**
The Century Club's new officers are Rose Harper, president; Hans Klaus, vice president; Leticia Perkins, treasurer.

PARENTHESES () and DASHES – mark detours that interrupt the reader. They add extra information or show a break in thought. Put no spaces before or after a dash.

Parentheses (more formal) enclose material that adds less essential information. The sentence would still make sense if you vacuumed out the words inside the parentheses. Put a space before opening parentheses and after closing parentheses.

Take your camping supplies (tent, flashlight, canteen, and hiking boots) to the parking lot.

The Clown College graduates (Tilly, Stringbean, Jig-Jiggity, and Squirt) rode tricycles to get their diplomas.

(In both examples, using commas instead of parentheses would confuse the reader.)

Dashes – more informal – draw attention or add information. Dashes help emphasize words, phrases or clauses.

Television – though I never watch it myself – has become the national obsession.

In my opinion, Jackson – a serious flirt – is not husband material.

(In both examples, commas would also be correct.)