

# Colons, Semicolons, Dashes, and Parentheses

**Colon:** The colon calls attention to what follows. When you see one, you can usually replace it with one of these phrases: as follows, the following, namely/that, or which is.

“I have three requests: your silence, attention, and patience.” (Namely is implied.)

“There were five slices: red cabbage, onions, leeks, carrots, and turnips.” (As follows is implied.)

**Semicolon:** The semicolon is used between two sentences that could stand on their own, but are closely connected. It emphasizes the link between ideas.

“She had leftovers in the fridge; however, she wanted pizza.”

“The yarn was soft wool; it had been dyed a deep shade of blue.”

The other use for semicolons, which is less common, is to use a semicolon between objects in a series when commas are contained in the series.

“She enjoyed many things about the show: its layered, sophisticated portrayals of its characters; the unexpected, surprising plot twists; and the subtle, but effective, use of symbolism in its storylines.”

**Dashes:** There are three kinds of dash-type punctuation: hyphens, en-dashes, and em-dashes.

**Hyphen (-):** The short dash used to show a syllable break, or to form a compound term, such as in-class assignment.

**En-dash (-):** The medium length dash used to show a range, as in dates or times.

“The meeting is scheduled to run from 4:30-5:45.”

“Vacation prices are frequently higher in the busy season, which, in this area, is typically from May-August.”

**Em-dash (—):** The longer dash that shows a significant sentence shift or break. It can be used in many of the same ways as commas and colons, but it either can give more emphasis to the new material or allow the addition of material that could not smoothly be worked into a sentence in any other way.

“Perhaps there was to him a divinity expressed in the voice of the other—stern, hard, with no reflection of fear in it.” (Stephen Crane)

“Very few Americans—indeed I think none—had ever seen this lady, about whom there were some singular stories.” (Henry James)

**Parentheses:** Parentheses are used to enclose additional information that has been added to a sentence; parentheses can only be used if the material within them is not grammatically vital to the workings of the sentence.

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Reasons for using parentheses:

- To clarify, define, or illustrate a term or concept in the sentence.

“My mother is a member of the NEA (National Education Administration).”

- As another way to include extra information without having to work it into the sentence.

“Please order sushi (tuna, eel, and salmon) for the meeting.”

- As an interjection in another voice or tone, which is frequently done to add humor.

“I went shopping today; there were several things I needed to pick up at the department store. (Well, perhaps “need” isn’t quite the right word.)”

A Guide to Colons, Semicolons, Dashes, and Parentheses (Adapted from Schuster, *Breaking the Rules*)

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