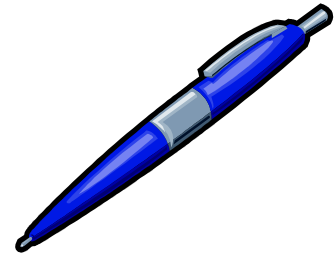


# The Colon

Colons are used to create special effects. Compare:

- ◆ I admire her poetry. Its imagery is magnificent.
- ◆ I admire her poetry for its magnificent imagery.
- ◆ I admire her poetry: its imagery is magnificent.



All three versions are “correct.”

- The **first example** is emphatic and probably clear—your reader will probably realize that the second sentence explains the first.
- The **second example** is clearer, and it flows along smoothly.
- The **third example**, however, is clearer than the first and just as clear as the second, and it creates a unique kind of silence—not just a break (the period in the first example did that) but mild suspense.

Here are some expressive patterns for using the colon.

## 1. Use a colon before a list that follows a complete statement.

- Tammy brought several items for her upcoming cruise: a polka-dot bikini, a cocktail dress, and two pairs of metallic sandals.

(Note: do not use a colon with the words **such as** or *including*. Example: The health board discussed many problems, *such as* poor water quality, an aging sewage treatment system, and the lack of an alternate water supply. [A comma is needed before *such as* because the information following it is simply illustrative.]

## 2. Use a colon to set off words that rename a noun or pronoun) at the end of the sentence. The colon is more formal, less flamboyant, than a dash.

His mind held only one thought: revenge  
**versus**  
His mind held only one thought—revenge.

## 3. Use a colon before a sentence that illustrates the idea of the preceding sentence in a different way. This signals to the reader that something important or explanatory will follow. In this particular pattern, the colon signals that the second sentence will specifically **explain or expand** some idea that was only vaguely expressed in the first sentence. In short, the second sentence makes the first one clear.

- A lizard never worries about losing its tail: it can always grow another.
- No one would deny that George Patton accomplished: he won battles.

- Remember what the old saying prudently advises: A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

Note: According to the MLA, capitalizing the first word after the colon should only occur when the second sentence is a principle or rule.

**4. Use a colon in a title for an academic paper.** To the left of the colon the author places key words that form the essay’s issue or problem or a **“mystery phrase”** that arouses interest; to the right of the colon the author places the essay’s **question, thesis, or summary of purpose**.

- “Jazz Lives: Portraits in Words and Pictures”
- “Feed Your Face: Why Your Complexion Needs Vitamins”

**5. Use a colon carefully after an abbreviation of two words, such as *i.e.* or *A.M.*** Do not place a period after the abbreviation.

- Our morning routine may vary, *i.e.*: some days we hike two miles before breakfast, and other days we work out at the gym.
- We expect delivery of the package by 5 P.M: no later, earlier if possible.

More information on the colon can be found in the *Simon & Schuster Handbook for Writers* by Lynn Quitman Troyka or in the *MLA Handbook*, Sixth Edition.