

COLONS

A colon usually announces that the writer is about to say something in particular. That “something” is often a list or a quotation, although not all lists and quotations can follow a colon. Except in its special uses (below), **a colon can only follow an independent clause.**

Colons with Lists

Use a colon to introduce a list when the words in front of it could stand alone as a full sentence (an independent clause) that could otherwise end with a period. The number of items in the list doesn't matter.

There are three primary colors: red, yellow, and blue.

In front of the house I saw it parked: a shiny red convertible.

We had a busy morning: we took the dog to the groomer's, we washed the car, we shopped for school supplies, and we pruned all the flower bushes.

Colons with Quotations

Use a colon to introduce a quotation when the words in front of it could stand alone as a full sentence (an independent clause) that could otherwise end with a period.

He gave his son boring, familiar advice: “neither a borrower nor a lender be.”

Colons in Ordinary Sentences

Use a colon to connect full sentences (independent clauses) that could otherwise end with a period when the second clause explains or summarizes the first.

I hated the house: its rooms were dark and tiny.

I'd gone to every class, done all the reading, met with my tutor, and read over my notes every night: I knew I was prepared.

Special Uses of the Colon

Use a colon after the salutation in a formal letter.

Dear Senator Craig:

Use a colon to indicate hours and minutes.

Class begins at 9:30 a.m.

Use a colon to show proportions.

The ratio of syrup to water is 1:4.

Use colons when writing out the full title or publication information of a book, movie, or other work. One colon goes between the title and subtitle; another goes between city and publisher.

The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King.

New York: The Seabury Press.

Misuses of the Colon

Because a colon can only follow an independent clause, it cannot be used

After **such as, including, or for example**

(wrong) We have many toppings, for example: olives, anchovies, and peppers.

Between a verb and its object or complement.

(wrong) In a rage, Casey threw: the book, the phone, and the pillow.

Between a preposition and its object.

(wrong) I'm going to the party with: Celina, Maricela, and Ellie.

If a colon introduces a list, the sentence cannot continue after the list is finished.

(wrong) Casey packed everything: the meat, the eggs, and the fruit, and put the picnic basket in the car.

Practice

Insert or remove any colons in the following sentences as appropriate.

1. There are two kinds of people in the world those who divide the world into two groups and those who don't.
2. I.S.U.'s motto is: Veritas Vos Liberabit, "the truth will make you free."
3. Idaho offers many outdoor activities such as fishing, skiing, and hiking.
4. I live by Oscar Wilde's advice "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it."
5. The radio was playing her favorite Elvis songs "Kentucky Rain" and "Blue Suede Shoes."
6. When you go to the store don't forget to get toothpaste, orange juice, and dog food.
7. She plays three instruments the fiddle, the mandolin, and the recorder.
8. Her many attempts had one thing in common: complete failure.
9. We saw daffodils, apple blossoms, and lambs in the fields, spring is here.
10. Thomas Jefferson observed: "I find that the harder I work, the more luck I seem to have."

Answers

1. There are two kinds of people in the world: those who divide the world into two groups and those who don't.
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