



## WRITER'S STUDIO RESOURCES: COLONS



### What is a colon?

A colon is a punctuation mark that may be used to signify an explanation, bring attention to something, or join ideas together. It can link an independent or dependent clause with another clause, phrase, or word when there is a strong connection between the two.

### Why would I use a colon?

Colons are used mostly to separate parts in a sentence and to clarify relationships among various parts of the sentence. Colons indicate that what follows will explain or expand on what comes before the colon. A colon should be used in cases where the second main clause interprets or sums up the first.

### How do I know when to use a colon?

When it comes to learning when and where a colon should be used, it can be a very intimidating task for many writers. Below are some of the more common guidelines and examples to get you started.



## Colons Rules and Examples

### Rule: Colons with list, series, noun, or noun phrases

When the elements of a list, series, noun, or noun phrases do not fit naturally into a sentence's structure, use a colon after an independent clause to introduce the elements. The colon should be used to announce, introduce, or direct attention to the list, noun, or noun phrase. A series is a group of three or more items having the same purpose and form in a sentence (basically, things in a list). A noun phrase is a noun and any words in the sentence that modify it. These modifiers include articles, adjectives, participles, and possessive pronouns.

#### Lists/series example:

The professor expected three things : attendance, participation, and hardwork.

The colon in this example signals your attention to what the professor is expecting. Without the explanation after the colon, we would not know what the professor expected from his students.

#### Noun/noun phrase example:

My vacation provided me what I needed most : relaxation and adventure.

Here, the colon directs the readers attention to what the vacation provided. The colon clarifies the relationship between the other parts of the sentence.

## Rule: Colons and quotations

Colons can be used to introduce quotations that are formal or lengthy. If you use a complete sentence to introduce a quotation, you need a colon after the sentence. Colons also introduce quotations that do not begin with clauses like “he said/she said.” The colon will always precede the quotation mark.

Both the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Declaration of Rights that came before it pronounce these ideas of equality and liberty as natural born rights, best summed up as stated in the Virginia Declaration of Rights,

“all men are by nature equally free and independent and have certain inherent rights”.

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Here, the colon is introducing a formal quotation. The sentence before the colon is a independent clause that is interpreted and summed up by the quote. While we would be able to understand that both the Declaration of Independence and Virginia Declaration of Rights pronounce ideas of equality and liberty, the quote helps the audience understand the similarity between the two documents and provides expansions on the writer’s ideas.

## Rule: Colons joining sentences

Colons can join two complete sentences when the second sentence completes, explains, or illustrates an idea from the first sentence. The colon is a cue that the second sentence explains a closely related idea to the previous sentence.

I didn’t like the movie we saw : it had too many gruesome scenes.

Both of these sentences are complete and could stand by themselves. The second sentence is joined by the colon to provide explanation for why the writer did not like the movie. The second sentence is summing up the first sentence which allows the audience interpret that the movie was too gruesome for the writer to enjoy.

**Note!** After the colon, you may choose to capitalize the first word of the main clause or leave it lowercase. Whether you decide to capitalize or leave the first letter a lowercase, it is ultimately your own style choice, but you should be consistent with your choice throughout your writing.