Help With: Colons and Semicolons

A colon is used if you want to point out the result or consequence of a statement—the complement to what you wrote in the first part of the sentence.

Iraq’s actions can only mean one thing: war. The captain only said one thing: “Let’s do it!”
She is only going to Seoul for one thing: to shop for clothes.

Notice that you can have various types of phrases after the colon. But shorter is usually better.

She is only going to Seoul for one thing: shopping for clothes.
She is only going to Seoul for one thing: she wants to shop for clothes.

Colons are also used to begin a list. Use commas to set apart elements of the list, and include and or or before the last element.

We need some groceries for the party: grapes, beer, eggs, and chocolate.

Don’t get confused if sometimes a writer lumps together similar things with and, treating a group as one element in a list. The following sentence is fine:

We need four things: grapes, beer, salt and pepper, and chocolate.

But make sure that your sentence doesn’t start including too many elements with different verb tenses or phrasings. Avoid full sentences as elements. The reader can easily get lost.

✘ We need some groceries: grapes would be nice, my roommate Sean drank all the beer, I really like beans, and we’ll be needing chocolate. (Confusing)

A semicolon is used if you want to link two sentences together that have a related subject.

✘ Peter is very lazy, he plays video games all day. (Wrong—comma splice)
✔ Peter is very lazy, as he plays video games all day. (Right—conjunction)
✔ Peter is very lazy. He plays video games all day. (Right—separate sentences)
✔ Peter is very lazy; he plays video games all day. (Right—semicolon use)

Semicolons are used the same way as a period is. But if you want to emphasize that two thoughts are connected, a semicolon works well.

Peter is very lazy; he plays video games all day.

Sometimes a semicolon is useful to avoid referent confusion. Look at the following sentences:

✘ My sisters are all successful. Susan works in a button factory, Carol is a doctor, and Amy is a pilot. That’s why I don’t see her often.
✔ Which person is her? If you want to make it clear that her is Amy, and that being a pilot is the reason you don’t see her often, use a semicolon: Amy is a pilot; that’s why I don’t see her often.