The Colon

courtesy of the
Franklin & Marshall College
Writing Center

According to Joseph M. Williams, author of the writing guide Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity & Grace, “A mark of punctuation that adds a touch of elegance is the colon: At the end of a grammatical sentence, it is shorthand for to illustrate, for example, that is, let me expand on what I just said, [or] therefore.”

Using a colon—and using it well—can be the sign of a sophisticated writer. Be warned, though: Avoid overuse! Too many colons can bog down your prose, making it hard for the reader to decipher meaning.

1. **Use a colon after an independent clause to direct attention to a list, an appositive, a quotation, or a summary or an explanation.**

   **Use a colon to introduce a list that includes the phrase “the following” or “as follows”**

   *The recipe for a perfect picnic includes the following: hard-boiled eggs, cucumber sandwiches, ice-cold lemonade, a checkered blanket, and a group of good friends.*

   **Use a colon to direct attention to an appositive (a noun or phrase that renames or characterizes a nearby noun)**

   *My college roommate grew angry at the smallest infraction. She had the most ironic name: Patience.*

   **Use a colon to introduce a quotation**

   *Consider these words of advice from Theodore Roosevelt: “Believe you can and you’re halfway there.”*

   **Use a colon to lead into summary or an explanation:**

   *This book is primarily characterized by pretension: The author even claims in the title that “Everything is Illuminated.”*

   *Happiness is like a promotion: You must work to achieve it.*

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2. **Use a colon according to convention.**

   - **After a salutation in a letter:** Dear President Porterfield:
   - **Between hours and minutes:** 5:16 p.m.
   - **To indicate proportions:** The ratio of men to women was 2:1
   - **To differentiate a Title and Subtitle:** *Style: Ten Lesson in Clarity & Grace*

### Avoid These Common Misuses of the Colon

1. **Do not use a colon between a verb and its object or complement:**

   *A few of my favorite things are* robots, sunshine, and mint chocolate chip ice cream.

2. **Do not use a colon between a preposition and its object:**

   *My musical repertoire consists of* compositions by Bach, Handel, and Vivaldi.

3. **Do not use a colon when a list is introduced with the phrases “such as,” “including,” or “for example.”**

   *F&M has many illustrious alumni, including* Mary Schapiro, Edwin Eshleman, James Lapine, and Theodore Woodward.

### Punctuating Colons

There is no clear consensus whether the independent clause following a colon should be capitalized. Some disciplines require that it is, some don’t.

- MLA requires capitalization of the first letter following a colon when the colon introduces an independent clause.

  *The 9/11 attack on the twin towers fundamentally changed America: Lines were drawn between allies and enemies while America’s sense of security was forever shattered.*

Never capitalize lists or appositives that follow a colon.

- *There are only two things I fear: cottage cheese and lizards.*

- *Granite contains the following minerals: potassium feldspar, plagioclase feldspar, quartz, and biotite.*

Lastly, remember to place colons outside quotation marks.

- *I generally despise anything “cutsy”: puppy dogs and pussycats really upset me.*