



# Colons, Semicolons, Hyphens, & Dashes

Using punctuation correctly improves the clarity and credibility of your work. In addition to learning and practicing the basic rules introduced in this handout, always tailor your work to your audience and assignment.

## The Colon

The colon signals the reader to anticipate what follows, usually an explanation or a list. **The clause preceding the colon must be an independent sentence.** (An independent clause provides a complete thought and consists of a subject and predicate, which is the verb stating the main action or state of being.)

**Example:** He was faced with a difficult choice: he had to choose either physics or biology.

Clauses that end in *as follows* or *the following* are good examples of when a colon should be used; however, the phrase *such as* is **not** followed by a colon because it is not part of a complete sentence.

**Incorrect:** At the store, I bought lots of stuff, such as: cheese, bread, milk.

**Correct:** At the store, I bought lots of stuff, such as cheese, bread, and milk.

**Correct:** At the store, I bought the following: cheese, bread, and milk.

## The Semicolon

The semicolon takes the place of a period when **joining two closely related independent clauses** with no coordinating conjunction (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*).

**Example:** He was beginning to heal; the doctor had decided to take out the stitches.

A semicolon also links two independent clauses when the second clause begins **with a conjunctive adverb** (e.g. *additionally, finally, consequently, however, therefore*).

**Example:** He thought he had failed the test; however, he passed.

Semicolons **separate items in a list** when the items in the list include commas.

**Example:** The participants included Ann, my aunt; Daniel, my cousin; and James, my brother.

**Example:** He disliked carrots, beans, and corn; snow, rain, and fog; and soccer, running, and golf.

## The Hyphen

The hyphen is a short horizontal line that is used in some compound words and is also used to connect prefixes and suffixes to main words.

**Examples:** twenty-four  
mother-in-law

**Note:** Not all compounds are hyphenated (bathroom, dragonfly, jet plane, log cabin, etc.), nor are all prefixes and suffixes (coworker, postmodern, etc.). When you are unsure if a compound word needs a hyphen, check a reliable dictionary or consider how the compound is commonly used in your field.

## The Dash

There are two main kinds of dashes—the en dash and the em dash. Each serves a distinct purpose, so they should never be used interchangeably.

### En Dash

The en dash is longer than the hyphen and is used to mean *up to and including*. It is usually used with **number ranges** or after a number to indicate a continuing process. Remember, there is no space between the en dash and the number it follows or the number it precedes.

**Examples:** 1998–2000  
pages 12–43  
Michelle Obama (1964–)

More rarely, as in the case with scores and directions, the en dash can mean *to*.

**Examples:** the London–Boston flight  
Our volleyball team won the game, 20–11.

The en dash can also be used in a **compound adjective** where one or more of the words involved is an open or hyphenated compound. The en dash hyphenates the compound words.

**Examples:** a twenty-three–letter word  
pre–World War II period

### Em Dash

The em dash is the longest horizontal line of punctuation. Its main use is to **indicate an abrupt shift** in emphasis or direction from the main sentence. Just like the en dash, there is no space between the em dash and the words that it separates.

**Example:** I haven't been scared by a movie—yet.

The em dash is also used to **set off parenthetical material** (interjectory information—often an explanation or extra commentary), much like a pair of parentheses or commas.

**Example:** The largest European cities—London, Paris, Rome, Berlin—all have great food.

The em dash can **set off an introductory subject** (or series of subjects) from the pronoun that is part of the main clause.

**Example:** Classes, homework, and working—these made up my October.