

Colons

A colon (:) provides a connection between words in a sentence. When used in sentences, a colon should follow a complete statement (independent clause, sentence). There are three main uses for colons in sentences.

1. To introduce a list

Examples

Mr. Jones has three cars: a Camaro, a Mustang, and a Challenger.

We visited four states during our trip: Florida, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi.

Sharon has applied to five colleges: Stetson, Yale, Duke, Stanford, and Auburn.

2. To introduce an explanation or information that adds emphasis or impact

Examples

Interstate roadways use even numbers for east-west highways and odd numbers for north-south highways: I-95, for example, runs from Florida to Maine.

Both of their daughters are in the Air Force: Jamie is a colonel in the Space Command and Jessica is a major attached to NATO.

He has very little time to complete the repairs on his Porsche: Sebring race trials start next month.

Mrs. Wilson is afraid of only two things: snakes and lizards.

She got what she wanted: a job with a movie studio in Hollywood.

It took the jury two weeks of deliberation to reach a verdict: guilty.

3. To introduce a quotation

Examples

My English teacher often expressed his beliefs about students who wanted to major in journalism: “I believe that anyone who wants to make a fool of himself should be allowed to do so.”

Graham Greene, one of the greatest modern authors, expressed disdain for platitudes: “People who like quotes love meaningless generalizations.”

Additional uses for colons

- **The salutation of a business letter or beginning of a speech**

Dear Dr. Jones:

Ladies and Gentlemen:

- **A subtitle**

Pennant Race: The 1961 Cincinnati Reds' Surprising Season

- **Details following an announcement**

For Sale: 2015 Mustang GT convertible

Capitalization with colons

Proper nouns and the first word of a complete sentence should be capitalized when following a colon.

The Treasure Coast includes three counties: Martin, Indian River, and St. Lucie.

Susan was facing a difficult choice: Should she accept a scholarship from Florida State University or pay her own way at Georgetown?

Common colon errors

Incorrect: The travel agency sent us: brochures, menus, and itineraries.*

Correct: The travel agency sent us brochures, menus, and itineraries.

Incorrect: Jim's racing experience includes: cars, boats, and motorcycles.*

Correct: Jim's racing experience includes cars, boats, and motorcycles.

Incorrect: She has all the skills of a competent detective, such as: perseverance, intuition, and observation.*

Correct: She has all the skills of a competent detective, such as perseverance, intuition, and observation.

Note: It is acceptable to use a colon after the words "the following" or "as follows" with a list or explanation.

Incorrect: Our company has strict policies that include: no smoking and no personal phone calls.*

Correct: Our company has strict policies that include the following: no smoking and no personal phone calls.

Correct: Our company's policies are as follows: no smoking and no personal phone calls.

*** In the incorrect examples, the colon does not follow a complete sentence**

Practice

In the following sentences, circle (C) if the sentence is written correctly, or (I) if the sentence is incorrect. See answers on next page.

1. We studied: history, geography, and sociology in our French class.

C I

2. We studied all about France in our high school class: its history, its geography, and its social structure.

C I

3. She had a poor excuse for being late: she forgot to set her alarm clock.

C I

4. Mom ordered the following items a box of candy, a good book, and a bouquet of flowers.

C I

5. While you are at the store, pick up some milk, paper towels, and eggs.

C I

6. Sharon is good at three sports tennis, racquetball, and softball.

C I

7. There are only two ways to do a job: the right way and the wrong way.

C I

8. Writers need only one thing: an audience.

C I

9. John D. MacDonald, a famous Florida author, offered the following advice: "If the cards are stacked against you, reshuffle the deck."

C I

- 10 Bob's assignments are as follows: read a newspaper article and write an interpretation of it.

C I

Answers and explanations

1. We studied: history, geography, and sociology in our French class.

C I **colon must follow a complete sentence**

2. We studied all about France in our high school class: its history, its geography, and its social structure.

C I **colon follows complete sentence with an explanation**

3. She had a poor excuse for being late: she forgot to set her alarm clock.

C I **capitalize complete sentence following a colon (*late: She*)**

4. Mom ordered the following items a box of candy, a good book, and a bouquet of flowers.

C I **list following sentence requires a colon (*items: a box*)**

5. While you are at the store, pick up some milk, paper towels, and eggs.

C I **list does not follow a complete sentence**

6. Sharon is good at three sports tennis, racquetball, and softball.

C I **colon must follow complete sentence (*sports: tennis*)**

7. There are only two ways to do a job: the right way and the wrong way.

C I **an explanation follows a complete sentence**

8. Writers need only one thing: an audience.

C I **an explanation follows a complete sentence**

9. John D. MacDonald, a famous Florida author, offered the following advice: “If the cards are stacked against you, reshuffle the deck.”

C I **colon used with “the following” to introduce a quotation**

10. Bob’s assignments are as follows: read a newspaper article and write an interpretation of it.

C I **colon used with “as follows” and introduces a list**