



There are three main uses of the colon.

THE COLON

The colon and semicolon are wildly misused pieces of punctuation. However, they do have extremely important functions and when used correctly, they will make your writing more fluent and eloquent.

What is it? The colon (:) is comprised of two dots arranged vertically, which is used to precede a list of items, a quotation, or an expansion or explanation.

TO INTRODUCE A LIST

One of the most common uses of a colon is to introduce a list. However, take note because a colon does not always precede a list.

FOR EXAMPLE:

The recipe calls for some unusual ingredients: lemongrass, peanut oil, dried bananas, and pumpkin juice.

NOTE: The clause preceding the colon must be a complete sentence and make sense on its own.

You can also use a colon in a list in which items are listed one by one, with one per row.

I need you to buy the following:

- » Tinned peaches
- » Evaporated milk
- » Brown sugar

TO LINK A MAIN CLAUSE WITH AN EXPLANATION

The second most common use of the colon is between two clauses, where the ideas expressed in the second clause are an explanation or continuation of the ideas expressed in the first.

FOR EXAMPLE: This is the moral of the story: always follow your dreams.

Although this first clause is a complete sentence, it does beg the question: "What is?" - the main clause after the colon answers this question and explains.

TO INTRODUCE A QUOTATION

The colon can also be used after a main clause and before quoted material.

FOR EXAMPLE:

The headline read: "Gangsters Going Down!"

Need more examples?

- » They shouted: 'We demand a salary increase! We want justice!'
- » He got what he deserved: he earned that promotion.
- » She bought three new kitchen items: a ladle, a whisk and a chopping board.

Can you identify the functions of the colons in each of these examples?