

Colons

There are only two rules that you need to know about the use of colons in sentences:

1. **Colons usually signal a general-to-specific relationship.**
2. A “complete thought” must come **before the colon**. Almost anything can follow a colon: a word, a phrase, a list (as in this sentence), a quoted passage, an equation, or another “complete thought.” (**Note:** “a complete thought” is a string of words that could stand on its own as a sentence. The grammatical term for this is an “independent clause.”)

COMPLETE THOUGHT: word, phrase, list, quotation or equation

General (intro) → -----specific-----

Examples: *There are three types of learners: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic.*

According to Richard Lanham (1992), the bureaucratic writing style has many faults: The Official Style . . . builds its sentences on a form of the verb “to be” plus strings of prepositional phrases fore and aft; it buries the action of its verbs in nominative constructions with the passive voice; it often separates the natural subject from the natural verb, actor from action, by big chunks of verbal sludge; it cherishes the long windup and the slo-mo opening. (p. 15)¹

Semicolons

Now, here are the two rules that you need to know about semicolons:

1. **Semicolons can act as “supercommas” to separate items in a complex list** (where commas alone would be confusing). Use them when there are commas internal to a single item in your list (as in the example below).

Example: *The conference featured three keynote speakers: Jane Wright, an expert in disability law; Jenson Okimo, a specialist in service delivery to ethnic minorities; and Arlene Giraudier, a researcher studying the impact of the Internet on rehabilitation practitioners.*

2. **Otherwise, semicolons function in the same way as a period.** This rule applies even when you are using one of the following connectors between two “complete thoughts”: *consequently, for example, furthermore, however, nevertheless, and therefore.*

COMPLETE THOUGHT; COMPLETE THOUGHT.

COMPLETE THOUGHT; *however*, COMPLETE THOUGHT.

Example: *Instructors need to adapt instruction to students’ learning styles; however, this adaptation can be a challenge, especially in large classes.*

NOTE: When writers join “complete thoughts” with a comma, a **comma splice** results; one easy solution to this error is to replace the comma with a semicolon.

¹ Taken from: Lanham, R. (1992). *Revising prose*, New York: MacMillan.

Commas

The five places where you need commas (and the two comma errors to avoid) are outlined here.²

1. **Use commas (or dashes or parentheses) to set off extra information.**

COMPLETE THOUGHT, *extra information*.

COMPLETE, *extra information*, THOUGHT.

Example: *Our month December, named after the Latin decem, means the tenth, not the twelfth, month (Sagan, 1980, p. 105).*
Broca was a superb brain anatomist and made important investigations of the limbic region, earlier called the rhinencephalon (the “smell brain”), which we now know to be profoundly involved in human emotion (Sagan, 1980, p. 9).

2. **Use a comma before and, but, for, or, nor, so, or yet** only when joining complete thoughts (i.e., a string of words that could stand on its own as a sentence).

COMPLETE THOUGHT, *and* COMPLETE THOUGHT.

Example: *The computer did not win the Chess Open, but this is the first time one has done well enough to enter such a competition (Sagan, 1980, p. 286).*

3. **Use a comma to set off introductory words or phrases.**

***Introductory phrase*, COMPLETE THOUGHT.**

Example: *After leaving Germany, Einstein learned that the Nazis had placed a price of 20,000 marks on his head (Sagan, 1980, p. 32).*
According to Ptolemy, the planets are affixed to immense crystalline spheres (Sagan, 1980, p. 272).

4. **Use commas to separate items in a list.** If the items in the list already contain commas, then use semicolons as a kind of “supercomma.” Note: the comma before “and” in a list is optional (it’s known as the “serial” or “Oxford” comma).

5. **Use a comma to separate two adjectives** if their order could be reversed or if the comma could be replaced by “and” (e.g., a fast-paced, exciting film).

Two comma mistakes to avoid

- **Do not let a comma interrupt your sentence flow and logic;** use commas only when needed. Never throw in a comma just because you need a breath, and never separate a subject from its verb with a comma. For example,

Example of Incorrect Usage: Over the past few decades voting participation in Canada, has declined among young people.

- **Use semicolons – not commas – to join what could be two separate sentences.** If you use a comma, you end up producing a comma splice, an error noted in the semicolon section.

² The examples on this page are taken from Sagan, C. (1980). *Cosmos*. New York: Random House.