

# The Colon, Hyphen, Dash & Semicolon



## The Colon

The colon signals the reader to anticipate what follows, usually an explanation or a list. Remember, the clause preceding the colon **must** always be a complete sentence.

Examples: Doug was faced with an impossible choice: Should he date Mary or Sue?  
Perhaps Jesus's most profound doctrine was spoken at the last supper: "Love one another."  
There are three rules for good writing: clarity, clarity, and clarity.

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, honey, and nail clippers.  
Correct: At the store I bought lots of stuff, such as cheese, bread, milk, honey, and nail clippers.  
Correct: At the store I bought the following: cheese, bread, milk, honey, and nail clippers.

**Note:** For more information on using a colon, see the handout *Punctuating a Series*.

## The Semicolon

The semicolon takes the place of a period when **joining two closely-related independent clauses** with no coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, yet).

Example: She was beginning to get better; she had stopped fainting the day before.

A semicolon also links two independent clauses when the second clause begins **with a conjunctive adverb**. (For a list of conjunctive adverbs see the handout *Comma Splices and Fused Sentences*).

Example: The status of women has been improving in Latin America; unfortunately, progress has been slow.

Semicolons **separate items in a list** that have internal punctuation.

Example: The custody case involved Mary Penople, the child; Diane Brown, the natural mother; and George and Nadia Penople, the adoptive parents.

Semicolons join two independent clauses connected by a coordinating conjunction if the clauses contain **internal punctuation**.

Example: He hated chili, stew, and baked beans; but somehow he loved beef jerky.

**Note:** For more information on using the semicolon, see the handouts *Punctuating a Series*, and *Comma Splices and Fused Sentences*.

## The Hyphen

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

Example: Twenty-four  
mother-in-law  
pro-American  
pre-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 whether or not a

compound word needs a hyphen, check a reliable dictionary such as, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, or *The American Heritage Dictionary*.

## The Dash

### En dash

The en dash is longer than the hyphen and is 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.

Example: 1998–2000  
pages 12–43  
Dallas beat Washington 14–10  
Mary Johnson (1984–)

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.

Example: a twenty-one–letter word  
the New York–Paris flight  
the post–World War II years

**Note:** In Microsoft Word, an en dash can be made by pressing **Ctrl+Num-** (Control and the minus sign on the number pad). On a Mac, press **Alt+Hyphen**.

### Em dash

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

Example: Eating broccoli hasn't killed anyone—yet.  
A strong father figure in the home is essential—especially for opening jars.

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.

Examples: The greatest modernist writers—Eliot, Joyce, Woolf—were all very well-educated.  
Jorge Luis Borges—who some have called “the greatest writer in the Spanish language”—published his first book of short stories in London.

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

Example: Eating, drinking, and sleeping—such was all that dog was good for.  
Heaven—that was his ultimate goal.

**Note:** In Microsoft Word, an em dash can be created by pressing **Ctrl+Alt+Num-** (Control, Alt, and the minus key on the number pad). On a Mac, press **Alt+Shift+Hyphen**. Also, For more information on using the em dash, see the handout *Punctuating Parenthetical Word Groups*.

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