# Semicolons, Colons, and Em Dashes

## Semicolons

Semicolons can be very confusing, and many writers avoid them altogether. But used correctly, semicolons can add style and grace to your writing.

1. Semicolons join two independent clauses, especially two that are closely related in thought.

* Independent clause; independent clause.
  + Meryl Streep is one of the best actresses of our time; she has been nominated for thirteen Academy awards and twenty Golden Globes.

1. Use semicolons between independent clauses joined by words and phrases such as *however, therefore, nonetheless, moreover,* *consequently, indeed, in fact, at any rate, for example,* and *on the other hand*. These words cannot connect sentences by themselves; therefore, they require a semicolon before them and a comma after them.

* Stephen is the valedictorian of Messer High School; moreover, he is class president and runs varsity track.
* UT Austin is an excellent school; in fact, a *USA Today* study shows that UT tied with the University of Chicago as the number one source of Fortune 1000 CEOs hired in 2004-2005.

1. Semicolons can separate two grammatical elements that are of equal weight, such as phrases or items in a list.

* Phrase; phrase (when phrases contain internal commas)
  + Johnny Depp’s memorable film roles include Edward Scissorhands, the tortured-soul science experiment gone awry; Willy Wonka, the infamous chocolate factory owner and protector of the oompah-loompahs; and Captain Jack Sparrow, the only pirate known to wear eyeliner on a regular basis.
* Item in a list; item in a list; item in a list (when items contain internal commas)
  + Cassandra loves reading histories about European royalty, like Mary, Queen of Scots; Diana, Princess of Wales; and Archduke Rudolf, Prince of Austria-Hungary.

## Colons

Colons have very specific uses. Like semicolons, colons can brighten your writing if used correctly.

1. Colons can direct readers to examples, explanations, or significant words and phrases. Colons used in this way normally follow complete sentences.

* Jane Austen’s best novel is also her most famous: *Pride and Prejudice* has been adapted to film ten times and has never gone out of print.

1. Colons can direct readers to lists.

* The union listed their grievances: long working hours, low pay, dangerous working conditions, too little time for meals, and poor management.

1. Colons can direct readers to quotations or dialogue.

* James Bond’s request was very clear: “A martini. Shaken, not stirred.”

1. Colons can join two complete sentences when the second illustrates or explains the first.

* Facebook will prove invaluable in the future: it has provided a way for us to remain in contact with people we would have otherwise never spoken to again.

1. A good rule of thumb: you can use a colon to replace the phrases *namely* or *that is.*

* The Harry Potter novels are among the best-selling books of all time: [that is] they have sold over 300 million copies worldwide.
* Dan Brown’s book *The Da Vinci Code* is so popular because it raises many points of controversy: [namely] the accuracy of stories in the Bible, the role of the Vatican in world history, and the divinity of Jesus.

## Em Dashes

Em dashes can be used in place of commas, colons, or parentheses to add emphasis and variety to your writing. Em dashes should be used no more than twice per sentence, in order to avoid confusing the reader.

1. Em dashes can replace commas to emphasize dependent clauses.

* Ned Stark watched as the direwolf pups—all six of them—ran from the kitchens with baked chickens in their mouths.

1. Em dashes can replace colons to emphasize the end of your sentence in a less formal way.

* Yesterday, John went to the most boring place he could think of—the DMV.

1. Em dashes can replace parentheses to emphasize clauses and make them less formal.

* Marie ordered her ice cream (Mexican Vanilla, of course), and then watched as the Amy’s employee tossed a scoop into a cup from three feet away.
* Marie ordered her ice cream—Mexican Vanilla, of course—and then watched as the Amy’s employee tossed a scoop into a cup from three feet away.

Source:

Friend, Christy, Maxine Hairston, and John Ruszkiewicz. The Scott Foresman Handbook for Writers. 7th edition. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc., 2004.