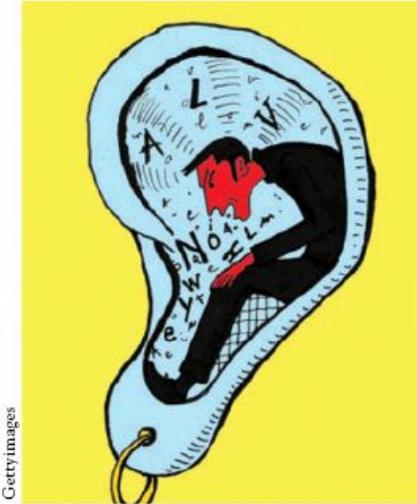


## The Legal Writer

Conquering the Colon:

*The Adventures of Advanced Punctuation*

By Suzanne E. Rowe



Perhaps the only punctuation mark more terrifying than the semicolon is the colon. Most writers avoid the colon for fear of misusing it. Most readers feel intimidated by the brave writer who dared to master the colon's nuances.

When is a colon appropriate? How many spaces follow it? Does the word after a colon need to be capitalized? This article will bring you closer to conquering your fear of the colon.

### When to Use a Colon

Colon usage varies from the exciting to the mundane. In the first two explanations below, think of the colon as the pause — or the drum roll — between an introduction and the exciting details. Picture someone on stage with an envelope saying, “And the winner is...!” The remaining explanations are more mundane, but perhaps easier.

#### Lists

One common use of a colon is to introduce a list. *The nominees for best actress were impressive: Sandra Bullock, Helen Mirren, Carey Mulligan, Gabourey Sidibe and Meryl Streep.* Be sure that the introductory sentence preceding the colon is truly a sentence. A colon would be incorrect in the following example. *The nominees were Sandra Bullock, Helen Mirren, Carey Mulligan, Gabourey Sidibe and Meryl Streep.*

#### Independent clauses

In the use that inspires the most fear, a colon separates two independent clauses when the second clause expands or illustrates the idea in the first clause. (Remember that an independent clause is just a complete sentence.) The drum roll — the colon — comes after the first sentence. *The defendant faced a difficult choice: he could accept the plea bargain or demand a jury trial.* In this instance, the colon functions somewhat like the semicolon, separating two closely connected ideas.

#### Quotations

Moving to the mundane, a colon can introduce a quotation. *My grandfather often quoted Dickens: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."* Note that a colon is not required to introduce every quotation. In some instances, a comma can introduce a brief quote. In other instances, when the quotation continues the flow of the sentence grammatically, simply insert quotation marks. *My grandmother believed "we must cultivate our garden."*

### Dialogue

A colon can also introduce dialogue. In a transcript, for example, the colon provides punctuation between the name of the speaker and what the speaker said. *Mr. Johns: No, I didn't.*

### Salutations

One simple use of colons concerns salutations in formal letters. Use a colon whether the salutation uses the recipient's full name or first name only. *Dear Mr. Lewis:* and *Dear Bob:* are both correct. If the letter is informal or Bob is a friend, follow the salutation with a comma instead of a colon.

### Titles

An additional use — of interest primarily to my faculty colleagues — is the appearance of a colon in the title of a law review article. As we all know, a colon appears between the title (the snazzy turn of a phrase that catches the eyes of student editors) and the subtitle (the portion that suggests what the article is actually about).

### Numbers

Three other uses include the use of colons in numbers. First, a colon shows a ratio. *The ratio of women to men in the jury pool was 3:2.* Second, a colon is used to separate the hour and minutes in a designation of time. *The deposition is scheduled to begin at 2:15 p.m.* A colon is also used to separate chapter and verse in a biblical reference. *After being found innocent, the defendant sat repeating quietly the words of Psalms 119:105.*

## How Many Spaces

The current rule in colon spacing is simple: use no space before the colon and one space afterward. The colon usage in the previous sentence demonstrates the proper spacing.

## When to Capitalize

When the colon introduces a list, the items that follow are not capitalized. *The following people witnessed the document: the attorney's secretary, the law clerk and the client's neighbor.* The exception is when the items in the list happen to be proper nouns (as in the example earlier with actresses' names).

When the colon separates two independent clauses, the second is not capitalized. If, however, the colon is followed by more than one sentence, then each following sentence is capitalized. Compare the following.

Colon followed by one sentence—

*The defendant faced a difficult choice: should he accept the plea bargain or demand a jury trial?*

Colon followed by two sentences—

*The defendant faced a difficult choice: Should he accept the plea bargain even though he was innocent? Or should he bankrupt his family by demanding a jury trial?*

## How to Combine Punctuation

Sometimes the colon appears next to other punctuation, and the adrenaline rushes again. What to do? When the colon follows information in brackets or parentheses, place the colon after the closing bracket or parenthesis. *The judge addressed the only people remaining in the courtroom (her two law clerks): she expressed her deep disappointment in the day's oral arguments.*

The colon always appears outside the closing quotation mark. *Only one reaction was visible when the foreman said, "Not Guilty": everyone in the courtroom sat silently in disbelief.*

Do not combine a colon with an introductory dash. One or the other is sufficient.

## When Not To Use a Colon

A colon is not interchangeable with its cousin the semicolon. While both can connect closely related sentences, the sentence following a colon should expand or illustrate the idea in the sentence preceding the colon. That makes the use of the colon more specialized than the use of the semicolon.

As noted above, a colon is inappropriate when the introduction to a list is not a complete sentence. *The legal assistant arrived carrying the files, the exhibits and the projector.* Because the words *The legal assistant arrived carrying* do not comprise a complete sentence, they should not be followed by a colon. If you're becoming attached to colons and want to include one, just make the introduction a complete sentence. *The legal assistant arrived carrying the following: the files, the exhibits and the projector.*

Do not use a colon when the introduction ends with *namely, for example, that is* or similar lead-ins to more information. Instead, use a comma. *Some print resources are better research tools than their online counterparts, for example, statutory compilations and deskbooks.*

Do not use a colon when the introduction ends with a verb. *The traditional elements of negligence are duty, breach, causation and damages.* A colon after the verb *are* would be incorrect.

Similarly, do not use a colon if the introduction ends with a preposition. *Recent graduates are concerned with passing the bar, finding jobs and paying off their loans.* A colon after the preposition *with* would be wrong.

### **Conclusion**

No writer should feel compelled to use colons just to look fancy. But knowing when a colon is appropriate might make you feel occasionally adventurous in your use of punctuation.

### **Sources**

*The New Oxford American Dictionary* (2d ed. 2005).

*The Chicago Manual of Style: The Essential Guide for Writers, Editors, and Publishers* (15th ed. 2003).

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Suzanne E. Rowe is an associate professor at the University of Oregon School of Law, where she directs the Legal Research and Writing Program. As the Luvaas Faculty Fellow for 2008-2010, she is grateful to the Luvaas Faculty Fellowship Endowment Fund for support of her articles in The Legal Writer. Her email is [srowe@law.uoregon.edu](mailto:srowe@law.uoregon.edu).*

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