Semicolons and Colons

Semicolons (;)
A semicolon is a form of punctuation that sorts out complex lists or links complete clauses.

Sorting out a complex list:
- Place semicolons between items in lists if some items the list include commas.
  - My classmates are from Milwaukee, Wisconsin; St. Paul, Minnesota; Des Moines, Iowa; and Detroit, Michigan.
  - Our good time at the fair included making a Spin-a-Paint masterpiece; going to the art show, where my mother’s ceramic vase won a ribbon; visiting the animal barns; and eating a honey sundae, an onion blossom, and, of course, mini doughnuts.

Linking closely-related independent clauses:
- Place a semicolon between two independent clauses (they could stand alone as a sentence) to link them in the same sentence.
  - I don’t have time to practice fiddling; my school work is too demanding.
  - It looks like it is going to rain; I better bring my umbrella.
  - When going to school in St. Paul, Minnesota, I lived in an off-campus apartment complex; my next-door neighbor became my best friend.

Linking complete clauses with a conjunctive adverb:
- Place a semicolon between independent clauses linked with a conjunctive adverb, also known as a transitional word or phrase. Some common conjunctive adverbs are therefore, however, consequently, and hence. Phrases include on the other hand, in fact, and in conclusion. Follow transitional words or phrases with commas.
  - It looks like it might rain; however, the weather report said to expect sunshine all day.
  - I don’t have time to practice before the concert; in fact, I hardly have enough time to change into my concert outfit.

When NOT to Use a Semicolon
- Use commas, not semicolons, after an independent clause (it could stand alone as a full sentence) joined with another independent clause by a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so).
  - It looks like it is going to rain, but the weather report on the radio said to expect sunshine all day.
- Use a colon—not a semicolon—when what follows the punctuation restates what comes before.
  - There are two things I need to do today: call my mother and feed the cat.
- Use commas to separate items in a list if none of the items in the list require commas too.
  - The first-year curriculum included courses in Torts, Contracts, Criminal Law, Legal Writing, and Justice.
Colons (:)
A colon is a form of punctuation used in several different situations. It often sets up and draws the reader’s attention to the ideas that come after it.

Some correct uses:
- **Prior to a list**
  - Our girls softball team will play the following rivals: Aberdeen, Fort Hays State, Arkansas-Monticello, and Southwestern Oklahoma State.
- **Before an explanation that has a complete clause (could be a sentence) before it**
  - There was only one priority left for me to see to: finishing my homework.
- **To separate an independent clause from a quotation**
  - My baseball coach loves to use the same phrase before every practice and game: “Shut up and play baseball.”
- **In a formal or business address**
  - Dear Ms. Jackson:
- **To indicate time**
  - The train leaves at 3:47 p.m.
- **Between a title and subtitle**
  - The textbook for our class is called *Ideas across Time: Classic and Contemporary Readings for Composition*.
  - The movie I liked best last year was *Impossible Journey: Never Say Never*.
- **A scripture reference**
  - Indicate the chapter of Sura, title 1, verse 6, in the Qur’an like this: Sura 1:6.
- **To indicate a ratio**
  - The ratio of cats to dogs was 4:1.

When NOT to Use a Colon
- **Do not** use a colon after a verb of being (am, are, were, was, will be, shall be, etc.).
  - Incorrect: Her favorite subjects are: math and English.
  - Correct: Her favorite subjects are math and English.
- **Do not** use a colon after a preposition
  - Incorrect: The movie was directed by: Ingmar Bergman.
  - Correct: The movie was directed by Ingmar Bergman.
- **Do not** use a colon after words or expressions such as, *for example, including, or namely.*
  - Incorrect: Ice cream comes in many delicious flavors, such as: bubble gum, vanilla, and chocolate. Chocolate includes: milk, dark, and double-double-dark.
  - Correct: Ice cream comes in many delicious flavors, such as chocolate, vanilla, and bubble gum. Chocolate includes milk, dark, and double-double-dark.
  - Incorrect: She has many interests, including: salsa dancing, quilting, making shadow boxes, memorizing the Latin names for trees, and beekeeping.
  - Correct: She has many interests, including quilting, dancing, and reading.
  - Correct: She has one favorite hobby: cake decorating.
Practice Exercises
For each sentence, select the punctuation mark from the choices inside the parentheses.

1. The defendant failed to check his rear-view mirror before changing lanes ( , / ; /) therefore ( , / ; /) he breached a duty owed to the plaintiff.

2. There are two kinds of fruit on the table (no punctuation needed / : /) oranges and apples.

3. I have a lot to do today (no punctuation needed / , / ; ) study for my test( : / ; , ) do my laundry( : / ; , ) both lights and darks( : / ; , ) wash the car ( : / ; , ) and call my mom.

4. Zach came to class breathless and overwhelmed ( / ; / , ) he had just come from volleyball practice.

5. The Europe trip will include visits to (no punctuation needed/ , / ;) London( , / ;) England( , / ;) Rome( , / ;) Italy( , / ;) Paris( , / ;) France( , / ;) Munich( , / ;) Germany( , / ;) and Warsaw( , / ;) Poland.

6. The book was written by (no punctuation needed / , / ;) Peter Jay Montreville.

7. He was very tired (no punctuation needed / , / ;) but he decided to go to class rather than take a nap.

8. He was very tired however he decided his class was too important to miss.

9. The tables had wonderful decorations (no punctuation needed / , / ; /) flowers( , / ;) balloons( , / ;) confetti( , / ;) ribbons( , / ;) and marble birds.

10. We discussed the Torah’s Behar (Leviticus 25(:/,)1-26(:/)) The Joy of Opportunity.

11. The colors of the banner are (no punctuation needed / , / :) blue, red, yellow, and black.

12. The lunchroom was decorated with (no punctuation needed/ , / ;) balloons ( , / ;) red ( , / ;) yellow ( , / ;) and black streamers ( , / ;) and glow-in-the-dark stars.

13. The play was excellent ( , / ; /) the actors were lively (no punctuation needed/ , / ;:) and the set was phenomenal.

14. The first book he cited in his paper was Understanding Comics (no punctuation needed / , / ;) The Invisible Art.

15. Her purse held many items (no punctuation needed / , / :) including (no punctuation needed / , / :) chapstick, money, a cell phone, cough drops, chopsticks, and some pens.

16. It was the first of May ( , / :) all the spring buds on the trees were starting to open.

17. It rained heavily during the afternoon ( , / ; :) however ( , / ; :) we managed to have our picnic anyway. (For answers to these exercises, see the next page)
Practice Exercise Answers

1. The defendant failed to check his rear-view mirror before changing lanes; therefore, he breached a duty owed to the plaintiff.

2. There are two kinds of fruit on the table: oranges and apples.

3. I have a lot to do today: study for my test; do my laundry, both lights and darks; wash the car; and call my mother.

4. Zach came to class breathless and overwhelmed; he had just come from volleyball practice.

5. The Europe trip will include visits to London, England; Rome, Italy; Paris, France; Munich, Germany; and Warsaw, Poland.

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14. The first book she cited in her paper was Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art.

15. Her purse held many items, including lipstick, money, a cell phone, cough drops, chopsticks, and some pens.

16. It was the first of May; all the spring buds on the trees were starting to open.

17. It rained heavily during the afternoon; however, we managed to have our picnic anyway.