Campus Academic Resource Program
Semi-colons, Colons, and Dashes

This handout will:
- Define the uses of semi-colons, colons and dashes
- Provide examples of how to use semi-colons, colons, and dashes
- Provide exercises to practice using these punctuation marks in a sentence

Semi-Colons
A semi-colon is used to create a pause longer than a comma, but shorter than the full stop of a period. A semi-colon looks like this (**;**)
- When combining two complete sentences (independent clauses) into a single sentence, the semi-colon acts like the dividing line between the two sentences. Without a semi-colon separating the combined independent clauses, the full sentence would become a run-on.
- When combining two independent complete sentences with a semi-colon, the second sentence should be related to the first, but does not need to explain it.
  - For the remainder of this handout, complete sentences will be referred to as independent clauses, and incomplete sentences will be referred to as dependent clauses

Uses of a semi-colon:
- Combine independent clauses into a compound sentence that has no coordinating conjunction
  - *Meister Eckhart was arguably the most progressive medieval Christian philosopher; some scholars may even claim that he is as influential to gnostic thought as Thomas Aquinas.*
- Combine independent clauses into a compound sentence that already has internal punctuation, even if clauses are combined by a conjunction (Essential Writer's Companion):
  - *I brought a backpack full of supplies, a Maglite, two huge water bottles, and a walking stick; nevertheless, I was still unprepared for the intensity of our hike.*
- Separate independent clauses in a compound sentence joined by a conjunctive adverb (Essential Writer's Companion):
  - Conjunctive adverbs include: additionally, consequently, furthermore, however, indeed, etc.
  - *San Francisco is the most exciting place I have lived during my relatively short life; however, I have little time to explore it between my constant schoolwork and my committed relationship with Netflix.*
- A semi-colon can also be used to "separate elements in a list or series in which the items already contain commas" (Essential Writer's Companion):
  - *My elementary school lunch always contained a fresh, handmade sandwich; a sweet, lustrous apple; and a crunchy, organic granola bar.*

Colons:
Colons follow independent clauses and can be used to present an example or explanation, draw attention to something (list/series, quotation, noun-phrase, etc.), or join ideas together (UNC Chapel Hill). A colon looks like this (**:**)

Uses of a colon:
- Indicate a list:
  - *Every writer needs to have a few essential materials: notebook, pen or pencil, computer with a word processing program, dictionary, thesaurus, and access to a well-kept library.*

- Direct attention to a noun or noun-phrase:
  - *Throughout high school my fall weekends always consisted of my two favorite things: football and family barbecues.*
- Indicate a quotation:
  - *The ancient poet Rumi said: "Sell your cleverness and buy bewilderment."*
- Provide an example/explanation:
  - *In writing this handout I had to remember one important element: the examples I use to explain each concept will determine if you, the reader, learns how to use these punctuation marks in all the correct ways they are intended.*
- Combine two independent clauses when the second independent clause explains the first:
  - *Running on the beach is healthy for your mind and body: the exercise improves your cardiovascular conditioning and releases endorphins in your brain that can improve your mood.*
- "To express time, ratios, and bible verses" (UNC Chapel Hill Writing Center):
  - Time- *We scheduled our date for 5:45pm.*
  - Ratios- *There is a 3:1 chance I will get the last cookie in the cookie jar.*
  - Bible verses- *The first line of Romans 12:2 says: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."*
- Some citation styles require you to use a colon to distinguish information in bibliography entries:
  - MLA: *The Gospel of Thomas.* Trans. Jean-Yves Leloup. Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 2005. Print.
- Following the salutation in a formal business letter:
  - *Dear Mrs. Swenson:*
  - *Dear Dr. Leavenworth:*

Common mistakes using colons include:

- "Placing a colon between a verb and its object or complement" (UNC Chapel Hill):
  - **Incorrect**: *The most important thing I want you to learn from reading this handout is: how to accurately use semi-colons, colons, and dashes.*
- "Using a colon between a preposition and its object" (UNC Chapel Hill):
  - **Incorrec**t: *An inappropriate place to take a nap is on: the dining room table, especially when your family is still eating.*
- "Using a colon after 'such as'/ 'including'/ 'especially' and other words like these" (UNC Chapel Hill):
  - **Incorrect**: *There are many great Russian authors including: Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Nabokov, and Pushkin.*

Capitalizing after a colon:

- If there is a dependent clause following the colon, you do not capitalize the first word following the colon.
- If there is an independent clause following the colon, you can choose to capitalize the first word or leave it lower-case.

Dashes:

A dash is a punctuation mark typically used to set off material for emphasis, or show an abrupt end to dialogue in creative-writing. A dash looks like this (–)

- It is different from the hyphen (-) that links words that are working together (*low-budget*) or words that are always spelled with a hyphen (*ex-partner*).
- One note about dashes is that they are almost never required by the rules of grammar and punctuation (UNC Chapel Hill).
  - o Because of this, we must remember not to overuse the dash so that it doesn't take away from our writing by making our syntax seem awkward or choppy.

Uses of a dash:

- Set off material for emphasis or indicate extra information that may otherwise be placed in ellipses or parentheses:
  - o *"Of all the gifts in the world," the old Rabbi said, "there is only one gift I would wish to be given again——youth."*
    - ▪ This example illustrates how a dash can be used similarly to ellipses to show hesitation, change in mood, building suspense, or thoughts trailing off (Straus).
  - o *Learning proper study skills——time management, organization, note-taking, and memorization techniques——is important to ensuring success in college.*
    - ▪ This example illustrates how dashes can be used similarly to parentheses. The difference is that when using dashes the information contained between them is given extra emphasis, whereas with parentheses, the information contained between the parentheses is given less emphasis.
- Modify a noun:
  - o *We climbed the tallest tree in our neighborhood——the oak at the center of the park——laughing and scuffing our knees on the bark, while squirrels and blue jays danced above us.*
- Indicate the introduction or conclusion of a sentence:
  - o *Introduction: Form, image, metaphor, sound——these four elements are essential in analyzing poetry.*
  - o *Conclusion: Finals week can be extremely stressful on college students when they engage in unhealthy study practices——excessive caffeine intake, all night study sessions, and little exposure to fresh air and sunlight.*
- Disrupt dialogue:
  - o *"Plea——plea——please don't yell at me."*
    "We——we gotta get out of here!"
- Indicate an unfinished sentence:
  - o *"If you would just listen to me you would know——"*
    "I'm not listening because I don't care!"

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IV. Exercises:

Fill in the appropriate punctuation mark, whether it is a semi-colon, colon, or dash. Answers are provided in the answer key.

1. In preparation for a tutorial session on writing, you will need__your essay, printed and ready to discuss; any notes you have taken; any sources you may need to reference; and the prompt for your paper.

2. If you want to begin doing rigorous outdoor activities__hiking, rock-climbing, multi-day camping, white water rafting__you should learn survival techniques before heading out into the wilderness.

3. One sport seems to best personify America's economic and cultural attitudes__football.

4. Our troubles started when the play began late, the usher led us to the wrong seat, and my mother spilled her water on the woman next to her __ although, the producer announced at intermission that everyone would get a free cookie, which seemed to change everyone's attitudes for the better.

5. Kahlil Gibran said__ "In the dew of little things the heart finds its morning and is refreshed."

6. This morning was beautiful __the sun cast an array of red, purple, and orange light streaming through the cobalt sky as it first peaked through the horizon.

7. My neighbor's cat__the orange tabby so big it looks like a baby tiger__keeps sneaking through my open window at night and sleeping on my head.

8. Some sports analysts believe there are two factors of Ussain Bolt's running style that give him an advantage over his counterparts__his long stride and minimal kickback which allow him to expend less energy while covering more ground than his opponents.

9. The old, ragged book __brown, faded picture of his first wife __ and dusty snow globe sat on his dusty desk like relics of a bygone era.

10. The rise of the festival scene has brought about a major change in music culture__ fans are able to see a wide variety of bands over a short period of time for far less money than they would have to pay to see each band individually.

11. What am I supposed to do with all this___
Don't ask me, it's not my problem!

12. You need only three ingredients to make flourless peanut butter cookies__ one cup of peanut butter, one cup of sugar, and one egg. Cook at 350 degrees for 10-12 minutes and enjoy!

ANSWER KEY: 1. colon, 2. dashes, 3. dashes, 4. semi-colon, 5. colon, 6. semi-colon, 7. dashes, 8. colon, 9. semi-colon, 10. colon, 11. dash, 12. colon

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