

# Colons: How to Use Them

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What, exactly, are colons? How are they different from semi-colons? How does one use them correctly? Here are the answers to all your questions – or at least the main ones.

- **Show the way:**
  - Use colons to direct a reader’s attention toward a list or quotation, for example:
    - Just a few kinds of foods make up a typical college meal: carbohydrates, sugar, and then more carbohydrates.
    - Thomas Wolfe claims that home is never the same place after you’ve moved away: “You can’t go home again,” he writes.
- **Clarify:**
  - Between independent clauses when the second explains the first, for example:
    - The biggest problem in America relates to money: there is a huge separation between the rich and the poor.
  - **Avoid some common mistakes** (don’t insert colons here):
    - Between a verb and its compliment (“...a typical college meals include: carbohydrates, sugar...”)
    - Between a preposition and its object (“...a typical college meal consists of: carbohydrates, sugar...”)
    - After *such as*, *including*, or *for example* (“...such as: peas, carrots...”)
- **Miscellaneous Uses:**
  - After the salutation in a formal letter
    - Dear Sir or Madam:
  - Times
    - 4:45
  - Ratios
  - Between titles and subtitles
  - Between city and publishers in a worked cited

Colons can come in handy in a lot of writing, both to make the sentences flow more smoothly and add variety to your sentence structures. They have many different functions and when used correctly can add a lot to everyday writing.

Information taken from *A Writer’s Reference* by Diana Hacker (available on the shelves).

For more information, see:

<http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/punct/colon.html> or *The Brief Penguin Handbook*, which is located on the bookshelves in the Fred Meijer Center for Writing and Michigan Authors.