

## Colon Check-up

As outlined in the *Brief Penguin Handbook* (Faigley, Graves & Graves, 2008)

Colons allow readers to link closely related ideas and emphasize the relationships between elements of a sentence. Like most punctuation marks, they are often misused and can sometimes be underused. It is important that you understand how and when to use a colon so that you can make effective use of it in your writing.

### To Create Links

- Colons link closely related complete sentences by indicating that what follows the colon will explain or expand on what came before it.
  - E.g., They had already made their decision regarding Bryan’s eligibility: he would be able to play as long as he passed all of his classes.
- A colon can also link main clauses with appositives. Appositives are nouns or noun phrases that rename the noun preceding it (e.g. my doctor, Dr. Smith, is the best. In this example, Dr. Smith is the appositive to “my doctor”). The colon can call attention to the appositive.
  - E.g., There is only one person with whom I would consider trading places: Peter Mansbridge.

TIP: If you’re unsure when to use a colon for these purposes, try putting *namely* in its place. If it makes sense with *namely*, then it is okay to use it.

- E.g., There is only one person with whom I would consider trading places, *namely* Peter Mansbridge.

### To Introduce Quotations

When using colons with quotations, it is important that you do it correctly. Often times, people will use a colon to introduce every quotation; this is incorrect. A colon should only be used to link an independent clause and a quotation that interprets or sums up the clause:

- E.g., Joe’s first trip to Iowa was not what he expected it to be: “I arrived at my hotel and immediately hated the state,” he admitted, “I’m not sure what I what expected it to be like, but I knew that wasn’t it.”

A colon is also used after an independent clause to introduce an indented block quotation. If an independent clause (a complete, standalone sentence) does not precede the colon, omit it.

- Remember: it has to be independent clause – colon – quotation.

### **To Introduce Lists**

Colons are most often used, and misused, when presenting a list. A colon can be used to join a list to an independent clause; do not use a colon to link a list to a phrase or an incomplete clause.

- Correct: There are three CDs on rotation in my car at all times: The Clash, The Violent Femmes, and Rancid.
- Incorrect: Some of my favourite bands include: The Clash, The Violent Femmes, and Rancid.

Colons are not to be used with every list that you are introducing; they are only correct when a complete sentence precedes the colon.

### Reference

Faigley, L., Graves, R. & Graves, H. (2008). Chapter 39. In *The brief Penguin handbook* (Canadian ed.) (pp. 506-511). Toronto: Pearson Longman.