

Let's Talk about Colons



Lynn Gaertner-Johnston (a business writing consultant): "The colon is a wonderful punctuation mark that tells the reader 'Get ready. Here it is' or 'Here they are.' I think of the colon as the drum roll that promises the immediate arrival of something or someone."

Mignon Fogarty (Grammar Girl): "...when you are using colons in sentences, the most important thing to remember is that colons are only used after statements that are complete sentences.... A quick and dirty tip for deciding whether a colon is acceptable is to test whether you can replace it with the word *namely*."

Lewis Thomas: "Colons are a lot less attractive for several reasons: firstly, they give you the feeling of being rather ordered around, or at least having your nose pointed in a direction you might not be inclined to take if left to yourself, and, secondly, you suspect you're in for one of those sentences that will be labeling the points to be made: firstly, secondly and so forth, with the implication that you haven't sense enough to keep track of a sequence of notions without having them numbered."

Lynn Price (the editorial director of Behler Publications, a publisher of memoirs and accounts of personal journeys with social relevance): "Be careful with your use of colons. They have a clinic-y feel to them, and they can easily take the softness and poetic flavor out of your writing. Think about using a comma or semi-colon instead. If you don't, chances are your editor will."

Gary A. Olsen (author of the website *Punctuation Made Simple*): "You might be surprised to learn that the colon is one of the most helpful and easiest to use of all the punctuation marks. You don't need to remember six or seven rules to understand how a colon works. In prose, a colon really does only one thing: it *introduces*. It can introduce just about anything: a word, a phrase, a sentence, a quotation, or a list....A colon gives special emphasis to whatever you're introducing because readers must first come to a stop, and so they pay more attention to it. For example, let's say you are writing a letter describing a product, and you want to emphasize above all that this product, the Jacobsen lawn mower, is reliable. You could very well write *The Jacobsen lawn mower beats its competitors especially in the key area of reliability*. While this sentence gets the point across, it doesn't place much emphasis on reliability. A sentence using a colon is much more emphatic: *The Jacobsen lawn mower beats its competitors especially in one key area: reliability*."

Let's Talk about Colons: What's your Attitude?

1. Write at least one sentence that illustrates the correct use of the colon:
2. Consider what the colon adds to your sentence:
 - What kind of feeling or tone does the use of the colon create?
 - In your sentence(s), does the colon act like a drum roll? A command or order? A mark of emphasis?
 - What does the colon add to the tone of the sentence? Anticipation? Sophistication? Clinical objectivity?
3. Creatively apply what you've learned and try to think of metaphors or similes that characterize the marks of punctuation we've studied:

A period stop is like _____

A comma is like _____

A semi-colon is like _____

A colon is like _____