



The Colon and the Dash

- ▶ Use a colon [:] after an independent clause that introduces a formal series. Words often used before the colon are: the following, as follows, namely these, or such as.

The goat ate the following items: three tin cans, a glove, a discarded gum wrapper, and five shoelaces.

- ▶ Use the colon to separate two sentences when the second sentence explains, illustrates, or supplements the first.

Flight attendants must explain aircraft safety features prior to take-off: they show passengers how to properly use seat belts, oxygen masks, and emergency exits.

- ▶ Use a colon to introduce long formal quotations without using speaker tags such as *said* or *says*.

His explanation reminded me of William Shakespeare's words: "It is a tale told by an idiot."

- ▶ Use a colon after an independent clause to highlight a single word.

Thomas King's writing can be summed up in one word: brilliant.

- ▶ Use a dash to emphasise information.

Last night Nicole won the lottery – in her dreams.

- ▶ Use a dash to indicate a break in thought.

I told Guillaume – or was it Gustave – that I don't like clowns.

- ▶ Use dashes to highlight a list.

Tom used everything he could think of – poison, cats, dynamite – but he still could not rid his barn of rats.

Note that the colon is more formal, and therefore more appropriate for academic writing. Use the dash when you want to be more dramatic.

Practice Exercise¹

Revise the following sentences by adding colons or dashes where necessary.

1. A week ago or was it two my parrot Mr. Biddle refused to talk.
2. The party was a success there are two gaping holes in the plaster there's nothing left to eat in the house the host is still sleeping in the bathtub.
3. Our get-rich-quick scheme is foolproof you pay us money and we get rich quick!
4. The qualities of a good hockey game are action, an enthusiastic crowd, and plenty of fights.
5. The candidate lacks only one thing, brains.
6. Bruce, how nice to see you after your trip to Paris, or was it Rome?
7. Adrian lived for one thing; fly-fishing.
8. There are three things that you can't learn at University; ambition, personality, and common sense.

Answers

1. A week ago – or was it two – my parrot, Mr. Biddle, refused to talk.
2. The party was a success: there are two gaping holes in the plaster; there's nothing left to eat in the house; the host is still sleeping in the bathtub.
3. Our get-rich-quick scheme is foolproof – you pay us money and we get rich quick!
4. The qualities of a good hockey game are: action, an enthusiastic crowd, and plenty of fights.
5. The candidate lacks only one thing: brains.
6. Bruce, how nice to see you after your trip to Paris – or was it Rome?
7. Adrian lived for one thing: fly-fishing.
8. There are three things that you can't learn at University: ambition, personality, and common sense.

¹ Some sentences adapted from Put it in Writing, Prentice-Hall pp.120-122

