

USING THE COLON

The colon “delivers the goods that have been invoiced in the preceding words” (H.W. Fowler). In other words, in its simplest form the colon announces what is to come afterwards; what follows the colon is an explanation or elaboration of what went before. So having introduced a topic in general terms, we can insert a colon and go on to explain that same topic in more specific terms.

Here are some examples:

Africa is facing a terrifying problem: perpetual drought.

[Explains what the problem is.]

The situation is clear: if you have unprotected sex with a stranger, you risk catching AIDS.

[Explains what the clear situation is.]

Shu-Ching was sure of one thing: she was not going to be a housewife all her life.

[Identifies the one thing she was sure of.]

Steve has one golden rule for dealing with money: "Never a borrower nor a lender be."

[Explains the golden rule.]

Several friends have provided me with inspiration: Lynne, Paula and, above all, Susan.

[Identifies the friends in question.]

We found the OAC without any trouble: your directions were excellent.

[Explains why we found it easily.]

I suggest we create a new post: Departmental Administrative Assistant.

[Identifies the post in question.]

The colon focuses the reader's attention on what is to follow, and as shown above it is used to introduce a list, a summation, or an idea that somehow completes the introductory idea. However we use the colon in this way only after an independent clause, i.e. one that can stand alone as a sentence in its own right.

There are only four remaining Japanese motorcycle producers: Suzuki, Honda, Yamaha and Kawasaki.

The group's efforts at lobbying were ultimately useless: the proposal was soundly defeated.

My mother gave me one good piece of advice: to avoid wasting time and energy worrying about things I cannot change.

What follows the colon may or may not be a complete sentence: it may be a simple list, or even a single word.

A colon may be used to connect two contrasting or opposing statements.
Man proposes: God disposes.

It can also be used to surprise the reader:
There are only three things wrong with your essay, Andrew: the beginning, the middle and the end.

Colons are used to separate book and film subtitles from the main title:
Star Wars III: the Empire Strikes Back
Dr. Jones recommended we read the book *Film Noir: From Berlin to Sin City*

They separate dramatic characters from the dialogue:
Hamlet: Nymph, in thy orisons / Be all my sins remembered

Colons are also used to introduce quotations.
Chris recalled Churchill's reference to Bletchley Park: "My geese who laid the golden eggs and never cackled"

Very occasionally the colon construction is turned round, with the specifics coming first and the general summary afterwards:
Ford, Zinnemann, Peckinpah, Eastwood: these directors all left their mark on the Western genre, in one way or another.

Like all inverted constructions this should be used sparingly.

You should not place a colon between a verb and its object or subject complement, or between a preposition and its object:

His godfather lent him: a tent, a Karrimat and a capacious rucksack.
(Incorrect: colon between verb and objects)

His godfather lent him a tent, a Karrimat and a capacious rucksack.
(Correct)

Her three goals are: to improve her public speaking skills, to increase her self-confidence and to sharpen her selling technique. (Incorrect: colon between verb and subject complement)

Her three goals are to improve her public speaking skills, to increase her self-confidence and to sharpen her selling technique. (Correct)

We travelled to: Bath, Stratford and York. (Incorrect: colon between preposition and objects)

We travelled to Bath, Stratford and York. (Correct)

The colon is used when citing passages from the Bible:

The story of Menahem is found in II Kings 15:1422.

It is also used for literature references:

Cameron, D., Working with Spoken Discourse, London: Sage, 2001.

And the colon may be used when expressing ratios:

Among students of English Literature, women outnumber men by more than 4:1.

In formal writing, however, it is usually preferable to write out ratios in words: Among students of English Literature, women outnumber men by more than four to one.