

Probing the Depths of Colons

Colons are used in the following situations:

- As a function of digestion,
- To introduce an explanation, example, or for emphasis (you must have an independent clause before the colon),
- To introduce a series or list (you must have an independent clause before the colon),
- To introduce a formal quotation (you must have an independent clause before the colon),
- To separate elements such as hours, minutes, seconds, biblical chapter numbers, and titles and subtitles.

Explanation, example, emphasis

Use a colon to provide examples of what you have mentioned. You must have an independent clause before the colon.

The men wore the coolest clothes: pale beige jackets, open collared shirts, cream-colored loafers, and aviator sunglasses.

My sister is so generous: she loans me all her clothes.

There's just one word for you: awesome.

Romeo and Juliet is a great play: it's my favorite!

Series or list

Use a colon to introduce a list of items. You must have an independent clause before the colon.

Gene likes all kinds of animals: rats, mice, and snakes.

My mom cooks some great meals: fried rats, mice casserole, and snake soufflé.

Quotation

Use a colon when you are introducing a quote *if* there is an independent clause introducing the quote. You must have an independent clause before the colon.

A voice from the corner rang out wild and clear: "I've got him! I've got him!"

Kyle Krichbaum, 12 of Adrian, Michigan has had an obsession with vacuum cleaners since infancy, when he was mesmerized by the whirring, said his mother. For years, he says, he has enjoyed vacuuming so much that he does the house as many as five times a day with one of the 165 new and used vacuum cleaners in his collection. Said a former

teacher, “It’s not that he didn’t like recess; he just preferred to stay inside vacuuming.” Older sister Michelle, interviewed for a July CBS News profile of Kyle, spoke for all of us: “He’s constantly vacuuming. I’m just like ‘why, why, why, why, why why?’ I don’t understand.”

Separating Elements

Use a colon when you are separating elements like biblical verses, hours and minutes, and titles and subtitles (no independent clause necessary!).

4:45 (hours and minutes)

2:25:05 (hours, minutes, seconds)

Deuteronomy 17:2-7 (chapter and verse)

Grant and Lee: A Study in Contrasts (title and subtitle)

Exercises: place colons and commas where necessary.

1. Fran had an excellent excuse for being late for work an early-morning power failure that stopped her alarm clock.
2. I ordered the following items from Sears two pairs of jeans four plaid flannel shirts and a wide leather belt.
3. His itinerary included the following visits Italy a week France eight days and England a fortnight.
4. Good writing requires a number of skills organization a precise vocabulary and revision.
5. In her speech, Mrs. Wagner quoted William Hazlitt “Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps, for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are and what they ought to be.”