

# The WRITING CENTER

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## Colons, Semicolons, Parentheses, and Dashes

**COLONS (:)** are arrows or road signs. They are formal and signal that a list, explanation, or long quotation follows. Put one space after a colon. Use colons:

- **To introduce a list.**  
*Mike's luncheon menu includes these items: caviar, biscuits, anchovies and spinach quiche.*
- **With a greeting in a business letter.**  
*Dear Ms. Pocketwrench:*
- **Before an explanation, even if it forms a short sentence.** This is a typical time when you would use a capital letter after the colon, but be sure that the information before the colon is a complete sentence.  
*Understanding the opposite sex is impossible: Men and women think differently.*
- **With direct quotations or if a complete sentence follows the colon.** Be sure that the information before the colon is a complete sentence, and use a capital letter if it begins a quotation or complete sentence.  
*When it comes to the stock market, I stick to this maxim: "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread."*

**SEMICOLONS (;)** are flashing red lights. They make readers apply the brakes before going on. Put one space after a semicolon. Use semicolons:

- **To separate two main clauses.**  
You could also turn these two thoughts into separate sentences, or link them with a conjunction.  
*Many criminals leave clues; detectives follow the trail.*
- **To separate a list of items that already includes commas, such as names and titles or cities and states.**  
*The Century Club's new officers are Rose Harper, president; Hans Klaus, vice president; and Leticia Perkins, treasurer.*

**PARENTHESES ( ) and DASHES (–)** mark detours that interrupt the reader. They add extra information or show a break in thought. Put no spaces before or after a dash.

- **Parentheses (more formal) enclose material that adds less essential information.** The sentence would still make sense if you removed the words inside the parentheses, but without the parenthesis, the reader could be confused.  
*Take your camping supplies (tent, flashlight, canteen, and hiking boots) to the parking lot.*
- **Dashes – more informal – draw attention or add information.**  
Dashes help emphasize words, phrases or clauses, though commas could also be correct to use.  
*Television – though I never watch it myself – has become the national obsession.  
In my opinion, Jackson – a serious flirt – is not husband material.*