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.*