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.

(Fine, Edith H. & Josephson, Judith P. (1998). Nitty-Gritty Grammar. Ten Speed Press.)