



The Spastic Colon

Sponsored by The Center for Teaching and Learning at UIS



- ♣ People often mix up colons and semicolons. Sometimes whether to use one or the other is a tough call. A colon signals that the two elements around it are equivalent; with a colon you're saying the same thing again in different terms. A semicolon announces the development of, or relationship to, what has just been stated. But sometimes it's only a stylistic choice, not a grammatical one.
- ♣ Most writers know that a colon is used to introduce a list or an example:
 - The film won awards in three categories: best drama, best score, and best direction.
- ♣ A colon implies a symmetry or equivalence between elements on either side. Something is to be presented: here it is.
- ♣ Remember to complete the statement before placing the colon:
 - NOT: Members of the committee are: John, Sue, and Joe.
 - BUT: Members of the committee are students: John, Sue, and Joe.
 - (A comma or dash would be possible here, too.)
- ♣ But a common mistake is to place the colon immediately after the verb, causing a "spasm" in the sentence and interrupting the flow of thought:
 - Before attending his class reunion he determined to: lose weight, buy a toupee, and take dance lessons.
- ♣ A good writer must be concerned with the principles of: style, clarity, and grace.
 - What follows a colon may be a word:
 - She had only one word for his behavior: reprehensible.
 - A complete sentence:
 - He disliked only one thing about her: she filed her nails in public.
 - Or a quotation:
 - Edward Young warned: "Procrastination is the thief of time."
 - (A comma could be used here, but the colon marks a more formal pause.)
- ♣ **Here's a tip:** Often a semicolon substitutes for a word like "but," "however," or "therefore":
 - Alan cut his hand badly; he had to go to the emergency room.
 - The doctor cleaned the wound; she decided the cut wasn't so bad after all.



The Spastic Colon

Sponsored by The Center for Teaching and Learning at UIS



Try your hand at punctuating these sentences, using a colon where appropriate:

1. She explained her decision not to teach any longer having to grade seven hundred themes in one semester.
2. There are three basic aspects of composition grammar and mechanics organization and content.
3. John explained his dislike of Professor Jones he lectures the entire period.
4. Harris was recognized for his leadership of the student body, his high academic average, and his athletic prowess.
5. John always did well in difficult courses like English, mathematics, and history.
6. For winning the contest, she was given an automobile and a trip to Jamaica.
7. Their postcard said that the weather was beautiful.
8. The boy found himself in an awkward situation he had inadvertently invited two girls to the dance.
9. The results of the poll were disappointing 7 percent in favor, 93 percent against.
10. Theodore Roosevelt counseled walk softly and carry a big stick.

Answers:

1. She explained her decision not to teach any longer: having to grade seven hundred themes in one semester.
2. There are three basic aspects of composition: grammar and mechanics, organization, and content.
3. John explained his dislike of Professor Jones: "He lectures the entire period."
4. Harris was recognized for his leadership of the student body, his high academic average, and his athletic prowess.
5. John always did well in difficult courses like English, mathematics, and history.
6. For winning the contest, she was given an automobile and a trip to Jamaica.
7. Their postcard said that the weather was beautiful.
8. The boy found himself in an awkward situation: he had inadvertently invited two girls to the dance.
9. The results of the poll were disappointing: 7 percent in favor, 93 percent against.
10. Theodore Roosevelt counseled: "Walk softly and carry a big stick."