

## POWERFUL PUNCTUATION: Colons, Dashes, and Parentheses—

Variety, variety, variety—the essence of strong writing. Keeping one’s writing varied and fresh ensures one’s writing receives positive notice by those who matter the most. These three useful marks go a long way in helping one stand out in a sea of mediocrity.

### Colon

A colon, like a period or semicolon, is a **full-stop punctuation mark**. Unlike the period or semi-colon, however, the colon draws attention to that which follows.

One must have a complete sentence in front of a colon for it to be used correctly. Examine the following examples:

1. **Using a colon to emphasize one word or concept.** *There is only one word I can think of to describe Lady Gaga: strange.*
2. **Using a colon to emphasize an entire sentence.** *Guns and Roses fell victim to an all-too-common plague: Axle Rose, the lead singer, turned into a total douche.*
3. **Using a colon to draw attention to a quote.** *Mark Twain said it best when he spoke about the importance of literacy: "The man who can read books but doesn't has no advantage over the man who can't read at all."*
4. **Using a colon to point out a list.** *My mother told me to pick up three things from the store: milk, eggs, and cheese.*

When using a colon, you must remember that a complete sentence **MUST** come before. What is wrong with the following construction:

*"The three things I need from the store are: milk, eggs, and cheese."*

What is the simplest way to fix the above construction?

**On a separate sheet of paper, revise the ten sentences below so that they demonstrate stronger grammatical control as it concerns the use of colons.** Note that you cannot simply add or remove something to make each of these correct: some may require re-wording (after all, the instructions do say to "revise"). If the sentence is correct "as is," write a C for that number on your paper.

1. The student council wanted: improved books, improved food, and improved air conditioning to improve their quality of high-school life.
2. The Bailey twins were convicted on three charges: swindling old people, walking in circles, and aiding mutated hamsters with X-ray vision.
3. Nancy Reagan said: "Just say no."
4. The old woman from the Wendy’s commercials in the ‘80s achieved fame with the following phrase: "Where’s the beef?"
5. Keeping emergency gear in a vehicle is not a bad idea: flashlight, first-aid kit, cell phone, and extra batteries, just to name a few.
6. The reasons to go to college are: better job opportunities, a more diversified résumé, higher cognitive functions, and more options in a demanding world market.
7. When I got home yesterday, there was only one thing I wanted to do: play World of Warcraft.
8. When I woke up, all I could think about was: breakfast.
9. I’ll never forget what happened on Independence Day last year: my mom dressed up as Uncle Sam, and my dad dressed up as Rosie Rivets.
10. The cook used many ingredients: eggs, milk, flour, and vanilla.

## Dash

Dashes are useful as sentence **interrupts that function a lot like commas**. They allow a writer to insert additional, **non-restrictive** information into a sentence. A dash is a very potent mark that puts **strong emphasis** on that which it sets apart from the main clause. When one needs to put stress on a particular thing, one calls on the dash. Examine the sentences below.

See if you can identify similarities in the way the dash is used and in the way colons, commas, and periods are used. Remember: it's all about variety!

***In each, be sure to identify the main subject / main verb: sentences are getting very complicated at this stage, but one must ALWAYS keep the main clauses at the forefront of thought or errors will be made.***

1. The care-takers—**those who are helpers, nurturers, teachers, mothers**—are still systematically devalued. —Ellen Goodman, “Just Woman’s Work?”
2. I would compete in this weekend’s marathon If I were a bit younger—**but I am not**.
3. Although the emphasis at the school was mainly language—**speaking, reading, writing**—the lessons always began with an exercise in politeness. —Elizabeth Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*
4. Dad—**who just turned sixty**—plays golf four days a week.
5. After the game, I could think of only one word—**fiddlesticks!**
6. Two of the strongest animals in the jungle are, ironically, vegetarians—**the elephant and the gorilla**.

**Q)** Why do you suppose the author chose to use dashes in number one when commas clearly would have been just as good? (Hint: look at the content of the non-restrictive element in the sentence? What does it already contain a LOT of? Look at number 3 as well—is not the same thing happening there?)

**Q)** Why do you suppose the author in number two didn't just use a comma in front of "but"--- How does the dash make a difference? (HINT: refer to the above paragraph that introduces dashes).

**Q)** How does the use of dashes in number two create a grammatical "interrupt" to the main clause? Could commas also have been used just as effectively in this particular sentence? If so, why not just use commas?

## Parentheses—

Parentheses, like dashes and commas, are interrupts that allow including a variety of comments into one’s writing. For all practical purposes, they function exactly the opposite of dashes: they take emphasis AWAY. Many readers consider information in parentheses to be nearly skip-worthy.

In other words, where **dashes emphasize material**, **parentheses de-emphasize material**. Examine the following:

1. Shirley (**whom my wife and I have known since fifth grade**) is my wife’s best friend.
2. Though I’m not particularly fond of broccoli, I know it is good for my health (**though I still think I can live without it**).
3. My wife wants to replace our stove at home (**we’ve had it for years**).
4. My dog (**Gunny**) loves to go hunting with me.

**Q)** For sentences ending with parenthetical information, what do you notice about the location of the punctuation used to complete the main clause?

**Q)** How would using dashes instead of parentheses in number one change the way a reader might perceive the information in the sentence?

The non-restrictive elements above are punctuated with parentheses because the author purposefully wanted the readers to consider it only as additional information. The author’s goal with those sentences is to put all the emphasis on the main clause and the main clause alone. The additional information is inconsequential.