

## OLYMPIADS SCHOOL – ADVANCED GRAMMAR STRATEGY: SEMI-COLONS AND COLONS

### SECTION A: Grammar (semi-colons and colons)

Your teacher will take you through the lesson and accompanying practice activities below. Like interruptions and conjunctions, which we worked on earlier in our course, semi-colons and colons (when used correctly) will give you the skills you need to write complex sentences that'll captivate your reader.

#### Semi-colons

Many writing guides instruct students to use semi-colons when writing **complex lists** and when **connecting independent clauses** that are closely related to one another. These examples might look something like:

- 1) There are basically two ways to write: with a pen or pencil, which is inexpensive and easily accessible; or by computer and printer, which is more expensive but quick and neat.<sup>1</sup>
- 2) I don't have time to practice fiddling; my school work is too demanding.<sup>2</sup>

It is true that semi-colons work great in complex lists, which typically need something other than a comma (because there are too many commas already) to help the reader distinguish the different list items. Students, however, should be cautious about using semi-colons to join independent clauses, because conjunctions often fulfill that task, and so do periods and interruptions for that matter. Take a look at how many different ways we can convey example two:

- A) **Original:** I don't have time to practice fiddling; my school work is too demanding.
- B) **Period:** I don't have time to practice fiddling. My school work is too demanding.
- C) **Conjunction:** I don't have time to practice fiddling because my school work is too demanding.
- D) **Interruption:** I don't have time to practice fiddling – my school work is too demanding.

All these examples are grammatically correct. Your choice from the list above boils down to the effect you want to convey. The example with the period as the separator is blunt and jarring. The writer's tone is curt and to the point, and possibly even business-like. The conjunction example, on the other hand, puts the emphasis on cause and effect, which lets the reader know that the writer is a logical thinker. Lastly, the interruption example offers a sense of haste and anxiety that'll make the reader think, "dang, this person is busy."

<sup>1</sup> Writing Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, <https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/grammar/punct/semicolons/>.

<sup>2</sup> The Writing Center at Concordia University – St. Paul, <http://concordia.csp.edu/writingcenter/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/semicolons-and-colons.pdf>

But what about the original example with the semi-colon? What's the effect? Some might argue it is neutral or merely functional. Others might argue, however, that it is the most boring and the most devoid of personality, or that it makes the writing seem needlessly sophisticated. Even if we take the first point of view and see the glass half-full, we have to admit it's sad that our punctuation choice is merely functional, rather than effect-producing. Always aim to produce effects with your punctuation and choice of language!

With this in mind, let's reconsider what makes for **good semi-colon usage when connecting two independent clauses**. We should be aiming to produce an effect. This means that the two independent clauses in question should be dependent on each other in a unique way; one that doesn't quite work with periods, conjunctions, interruptions, or other forms of punctuation. Here are some examples:

**Equal Position (both independent clauses appear equal)**

Some people write with a word processor; others write with a pen or pencil.<sup>3</sup>

**Relative Position (second independent clause appears reliant on the first)**

Muhammad Ali's prowess in the ring isn't the only thing he's famous for; his pre-fight poetry made his press conferences worth watching too.

Notice how in both examples, the subject in the second independent clause gets replaced with an equivalent word or phrase ("some people" vs. "others," "Muhammad Ali's prowess in the ring" vs. "his pre-fight poetry"). In the case of the relative position example, the subject in the second independent clause is a kind of spinoff of the subject in the first, and relies on that first subject for relevance. In the equal position example, both predicates in the independent clauses appear to be weighted equally as competing ideas (word processor vs. pen or pencil). Unlike the first example about fiddling, these examples would lose their relational quality if we were to replace their semi-colons with an em-dash or a period or a conjunction. Here, the semi-colons serve to provide an insight about the subject that is more theoretical in nature than the banal fiddling vs. school work pairing.

To summarize, your goal in using semi-colons should be to generate an effect. It is technically okay to use semi-colons to simply connect two closely-related independent clauses, but your writing will be much more memorable if you use semi-colons beyond the banal. The sense of balance that accompanies rhetorically-charged semi-colon sentences can offer eye-opening comparisons and insights: the kind that might make your reader feel like you just dropped the mic.

**Create your own original sentences with semi-colons below:**

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<sup>3</sup> Writing Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison

Complex list:

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Connecting independent clauses:

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### Colons

Writers typically use colons to propel their readers towards explanations of a word, phrase, concept, happening, etc.

Sometimes colons move the reader from the **general to the specific**:

We covered many of the fundamentals in our writing class: grammar, punctuation, style, and voice.<sup>4</sup>

Other times colons can be used to **introduce a quote**.

Shakespeare said it best: “To thine own self be true.”<sup>5</sup>

Keep in mind that, because you are using a colon to integrate the quote into your writing rather than a comma, the quote you are using should **offer a sense of finality or conclusion**.

One of the most useful ways for a writer to use colons is to **lead the reader towards an end point that summarizes, distills, explains, critiques, etc.**

The incongruity between St. Augustine’s enigmatic quote on mortality and the usurpation of death by the advertising industry creates what O’Neil refers to as

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<sup>4</sup> The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/semi-colons-colons-and-dashes/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

“simultaneous horror and exhilaration”: a key ingredient in the creation of dark humour (159).<sup>6</sup>

Thanks to Muhammad Ali, we’ve got a trick we can use against people who like to go on the offensive: the rope-a-dope.

**Colons can be used in titles**, with the similar premise of propelling the reader toward an explanation:

***Film titles:***

*Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*

*Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*

**Essay titles:**

“*Americana: A Commercial Reel of the Fear of Death*”

“Bergson’s Presence: What does it Really Mean to be Absentminded?”

“The Future of Kurdistan: The Iraqi Dilemma”

“Revoking Citizenship: Expatriation in America from the Colonial Era to the War on Terror”

The takeaway for colons is to remember that the phrase that comes after the colon must be a kind of expansion of the first phrase, and that it typically must drive the reader towards a conclusion.

**Create your own original sentences with colons below:**

General to specific:

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Introduce a quote:

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<sup>6</sup> From Mr. Ahmed’s M.A. thesis

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Lead the reader towards an end point that summarizes, distills, explains, critiques, etc.

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Essay title

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**Bonus: semi-colon and colon in action together**

To see the full force of consumerism in *End Zone*, it is not enough to analyze only Bloomberg's weight and asceticism. Osteen cites first Bloomberg and then Gary's girlfriend, Myna Corbett, as a chain of obese (and obese-revering, when we include Gary) characters that suggest that The Bomb is "the ultimate consumer item." Like Bloomberg, Myna chooses to be obese for personal reasons – in her case, it is to reject the "responsibilities of beauty" (66). That being said, there is a discrepancy between her personal aims and her symbolic weight: the former suggests rebellion against consumerism; the latter suggests complicity.<sup>7</sup>

Practice your colon + semi-colon phrase here:

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<sup>7</sup> From Mr. Ahmed's M.A. thesis

**SECTION B: Jigsaw Activity**

Your teacher may assign you one of the passages below. Aim to share your reading experience with your fellow students, focusing on the theories and concepts we've studied in class.

**The passages below are from the third lecture in Thomas King's *The Truth About Stories*, "Let me Entertain You."**

Group 1:

Page 61-68 ("There is a story I know...Once upon a time, we were...other things.")

Group 2:

Page 69-73 ("I've always been a reader...Ask an Indian.")

Group 3:

Page 73-78 ("Living together would be another matter...Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown.")

Group 4

Page 78-83 ("But in the second half of the nineteenth century...that superior cultures should displace inferior culture.")

Group 5

Page 83 ("The Reverend John Heckewelder...You've heard it now.")

**What to look out for in your assigned reading? What kind of issues or ideas do you predict will surface in the reading? Jot down any course themes, concepts, theories, etc. in the box below.**

**Summary of your assigned reading (you'll be asked to present your summary to your group members). What resonated with you? What confused you? What did you agree with or disagree with? Aim to not only summarize your assigned excerpt, but to convey your personal response to it too.**

**What are some important points, details, or observations that you didn't consider? Write down the additional points that your group members presented:**

**“JIGSAW READING” ACTIVITY: PART TWO**

**Get together in your new groups and present your complete summary to your group mates. In addition, record their summaries of their assigned readings.**

Group 1

Group 2

Group 3

Group 4

Group 5



**Group question prompt:**

Freud expands Spencer's theory in his book, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. He argues that the creation of humour is not the expulsion of repressed feelings; it is rather the expulsion of the energy that normally represses those feelings. Morreall points out that most summaries of Freud overlook this idea and describe laughter as nothing more than a release of repressed energy ("Comic Relief" 18), which is true for Spencer's hydraulic theory, but not Freud's. With this distinction in mind, Freud's theory is important for its idea that humour is the result of releasing our internal censor, which suggests that this censor was superfluous to begin with. Humour, then, becomes a kind of liberation tool from oppressive social bindings. Even Ted Cohen, with all his cynicism towards the three theories, admits that Freud's theory is "an extremely useful idea, probably with even wider application than Freud gives it." Cohen praises Freud's theory for its suggestion (not necessarily mentioned by Freud) that humour is a universal and good-natured medium through which we can give vent to society's foibles:

There are any number of things we find ourselves constrained not to speak, or give active voice to, because of political, social, moral or other strictures that seemingly declare these things out of bounds. And yet we think about them, wish to declare our interest in them, and have a need to express ourselves about them. So we do this with jokes, perhaps partly for the reason Freud suggests, that these things are just bursting out of us anyway, but also because we take advantage of a presumption to the effect that humor is slight, good-natured, benign, and therefore virtually universally acceptable. (473)<sup>8</sup>

**Question:** What makes King's humour "universally acceptable"? Another way of phrasing this question is, "how is King able to persuade both indigenous and non-indigenous audiences to his cause? Use examples from King's third lecture in your paragraph answer.

**Grammar rule:** include at least one colon and one semi-colon in your write-up (highlight or underline it).

**Tip:** make sure you have an idea of what King's argument/cause is, and briefly convey this idea in your writing.

**Another tip:** don't forget to include a significance factor!

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<sup>8</sup> From Mr. Ahmed's M.A. thesis.

