

# POWER PUNCTUATION!



The purpose of this workshop—and this handout you are holding—is to teach you how to use punctuation; specifically, three particularly powerful aspects of punctuation: the colon, the dash, and the semicolon.

When you think of punctuation—I'm sure you don't think of it very often, but bear with me—what do you think of? Is it just an annoying aspect of writing that you are afraid you will "get wrong" in your papers? Are you able to use punctuation to make your writing clearer and more sophisticated? My aim is to show you how to use three dynamic pieces of punctuation; by learning how to write with these little dots and lines, you can become not only a better writer, but also a more impressive one.

For each of these three punctuation marks, we will discuss three examples of how they can be used—two good examples, and one bad example. Let's get started.

## : THE COLON :

The colon is, in my estimation, woefully underused by college writers. Colons are extremely useful for students writing papers about literature, philosophy, and just about everything else. Think of a colon as your way of preparing the reader for something important. A colon signals "get ready, here comes the good part!"

### 1. use a colon to introduce a list

Julie went to the store for some groceries: milk, bread, coffee, and cheese.

This is a simple example, but consider how you could use a colon in a paper where you include a list of examples of a particular theme or personality trait:

Gatsby was obsessed with Daisy Buchanan: he dreamed about her every day, wanted to impress her by becoming wealthy, and hosted frequent parties hoping she would one day walk through his door.

### 2. use a colon to introduce a quote

In *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt points to the role the Romans played in laying the foundation for later thinking about the ethics of waging war: "we must turn to Roman antiquity to find the first justification of war, together with the first notion that there are just and unjust wars" (12).<sup>1</sup>

One of the most important things about writing a successful college paper is being able to use quotes effectively, to show that you have understood the text that you are writing about, and to integrate the author's writing into your paper. Colons are an excellent way to do this. Begin your sentence by introducing what is important about the quotation, and then place the quote right after the colon.

### 3. DON'T use a colon between a verb and its object, or after expressions like *especially*, *including*, or *such as*

Some natural fibers are: cotton, wool, silk, and linen.

In poetry, additional power may come from devices such as: simile, metaphor, and alliteration.<sup>2</sup>

Both of these examples split the sentence up unnaturally. If it doesn't sound like there should be a pause in the sentence, then there shouldn't be a colon there. Try reading the sentence out loud if you are unsure.

<sup>1</sup> from the University of Toronto's helpful page on quotations: <http://www.utoronto.ca/ucwriting/quotations.html>.

<sup>2</sup> from Andrea A. Lunsford's *Easy Writer* (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009.



## – THE DASH –

Dashes are a fantastic way to indicate which parts of your sentence should have the most emphasis, and to construct complex sentences which convey intricate meanings clearly. It is necessary to be careful when using dashes, as they can make your sentences jerky and a little odd if used incorrectly, but if you do it right the results can be quite impressive.

### 1. use a dash to insert a comment—or an example you wish to highlight—in the middle of a sentence

After the professor made her statement—"I'll extend the due date just this one time"—we applauded.<sup>3</sup>

In this way, dashes can be used in a way similar to how you would use parenthesis, but for a time when you want to draw more attention to the words in the middle.

### 2. use a dash to emphasize material at the end of your sentence, when there is a shift in tone or a different idea—when it's something really important!

Breathing heavily, the archaeologist opened the old chest in wild anticipation and found—an old pair of socks and an empty soda can.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. DON'T use an "en dash" when you need to use an "em dash"

It's not necessary to know the proper names for different kinds of dashes—but you do need to know that there is a difference. The "en dash" is similar to a hyphen, and looks like this: -. It's much shorter than the "em dash," which is long, and looks like this: —. In Microsoft Word, you can create an em dash by typing two hyphens right next to each other, with no space in-between the two words where the dash goes—Word will automatically convert the two hyphens into a solid dash.

## ; THE SEMICOLON ;

The semicolon is in some ways the "Holy Grail" of punctuation; if you can use a semicolon correctly, you can show that you are a good writer who knows how to craft a fine sentence. One good way to think of semicolons is of a halfway point between a comma and a period; semicolons are stronger than commas, but not as strong as the period.

### 1. use a semicolon to link *independent clauses* closely related to one another

Some people write with a word processor; others write with a pen or pencil.

### 2. use a semicolon to link *independent clauses* that are joined by a transition

Whatever way people choose to write, they are allowed to make their own decisions; as a result, many people swear by their writing methods.<sup>5</sup>

Both of these uses of the semicolon link two different, but related, thoughts, into one complex sentence. This is the magic of the semicolon; it brings together two things but also keeps them separate.

### 3. DON'T use a semicolon to link a *dependent clause*; both parts of the sentence should stand on their own as a complete thought

The police used fingerprints; which they used to identify the thief.

The new system would encourage students to register for courses online; thus streamlining registration.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> From Columbia's Writing Center Handout on dashes: <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/ssw/write/handouts/dash.html>

<sup>4</sup> Maimon, Elaine P and Janice H. Peritz. *A Writer's Resource*. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003. 469.

<sup>5</sup> University of Wisconsin's page on semicolons: <http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/Semicolons.html>

<sup>6</sup> *Easy Writer*, 112.

