

Note on using the colon and semi-colon

What are they?

The colon (:) and semi-colon (;) are punctuation marks that aren't often used in informal writing but they are expected – and useful - in academic work.

Why use them?

These punctuation marks help to divide up a sentence clearly, helping the reading to read your work as you intended it to be read and understood.

The colon (:)

The colon has three main uses:

1. To introduce a list:

Three groups participated in the study: parents, teachers and support staff.

2. To lead into an explanation or elaboration:

The rules are clear: if you miss the deadline, marks will be deducted.

There is one major threat that has not yet been accepted by all governments: global warming.

3. To introduce a (longer) piece of direct speech or a quotation:

Reid (2009, p.273) states: 'It is important, therefore, that course tutors and all teaching staff are familiar with dyslexia and how dyslexia may affect a person's self-esteem.'

The order of the two parts of the sentence is usually:

More general: more specific.

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The semi-colon (;)

The semi-colon has two main uses:

1. It is mainly used to join two *finite clauses* (i.e. which could stand as separate, complete sentences) into a single written sentence, when all of the following conditions are met:
 - The second part of the sentence expands on the first and the two parts are too closely related to be separated by a full stop.
 - There is no suitable connecting word, such as *and* or *but*.
 - The special conditions requiring a colon do not apply.

Examples:

The study by Adams (2008) indicated that most parents did not favour the proposal to change the school holiday pattern; additionally, Bahra (2010) found that over 30% of families studied had children attending different schools and were concerned about school holidays no longer coinciding.

The expectation was that there would be a perceived improvement in services; however, clients expressed 'confusion and dissatisfaction' over the timetable changes (Chen 2012, p.10).

2. A semi-colon may also be used to separate longer elements of a list, when items in the list are lengthy and / or include the word *and*, for example:

Participants in the study included: parents, representing the needs of children in the 11-16 age group; teachers, who were mostly full-time staff and taught a range of academic and vocational subjects; and support staff, all of whom were on part-time contracts.