Semicolons, Colons, and Apostrophes

The semicolon (;), colon (:), and apostrophe (‘) are often misused by writers who are unaware or unconcerned with their proper usage. As with other punctuation marks, the semicolon, colon and apostrophe are often thought of as “the trees” that obscure “the forest” of writing—that if readers simply forgave the improper usage, the piece’s intent and excellence would shine through.

Most readers are ready to forgive the occasional misuse, but critical readers may regard writers that blatantly ignore convention as unprofessional, sloppy or incompetent. The following set of rules from A Writer’s Reference by Diana Hacker and Nancy Sommers will point out some key usage points, followed by examples. Refer to pages 274–281 of A Writer’s Reference for a closer look at the semicolon, colon and apostrophe.

Semicolons

A semicolon may be used to link two independent clauses when the relationship between them is clear. Many comma splices (see handout on Comma Splices) can be repaired by replacing the comma with a semicolon. (274)

A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty. (Winston Churchill)

Use a semicolon between two independent clauses with a transitional expression, such as a conjunctive adverb or transitional phrase. (274-5)

Some people take supplements like Hydroxicut and Nopalina to help them shed weight; even if these were effective, they’d be no replacement for good diet and regular exercise.

Technology has had a positive impact on people in the developing world; farmers, for example, can use cell phones to quickly and easily research market prices and sell their produce at a fair price.

Use the semicolon between list items with their own internal punctuation. (275)

My favorite bands were The Mars Volta, led by the prolific Omar Rodriguez-Lopez; Radiohead, fronted by the meek and mumbling Thom Yorke; The Killers, up until Sam’s Town, anyway; and At the Drive-In, those hometown heroes whose discordant shoes I so desperately wanted to fill.

Colons

A colon is used to after an independent clause to bring attention to a list,

Incorrect: On our farm, we grow: wheat, alfalfa, and soybeans.
Correct: On our farm we grow three crops: wheat, alfalfa, and soybeans.
an appositive,

Correct: The perfect job for her was: teacher.
Incorrect: I know the perfect job for her: teacher.

a quotation,

It reminds me of a quote by Emerson: “Once you make a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen.”

or a summary or explanation. (276)

We had to cancel the party: too many people were sick.

Here are a few other conventions that call for the colon (277):

Formal salutation in a letter To whom it may concern:
Hours and minutes 6:35 p.m.
Title and subtitle Dr. Strangelove, or: How I learned to stop...

Apostrophes

Apostrophes are used to indicate contractions,

Won’t (the contracted form of “will not”) Rock ‘n’ Roll (the apostrophes stand in for letters in the word and)
Summer of ’69! (the apostrophe marks the omission of the first two digits in 1969)

as well as to indicate that a noun or a pronoun is possessive. (278)

Marx’s teachings (the teachings of Marx)
Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex (for nouns ending in –s, writers often omit the possessive -s)
Farmers’ market (If the noun is plural and ends in –s, add only the apostrophe.)

Avoid these common misuses of the apostrophe:

Some doctor’s are cruel. (in this example, doctors is plural, not possessive)
He was born in the 1920’s. (Don’t use the apostrophe for the plural of numbers.)
Review Commonly Confused Words handout to help you decide between it’s/its and who’s/whose

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