COMMONLY MISUSED PUNCTUATION: COLONS AND DASHES

Ursinus College
Center for Writing and Speaking

Colons and dashes are two of the most mysterious and misunderstood marks of punctuation. This handout is meant to demystify and clarify the function of these forms of punctuation, so that you can use them more accurately.

Colon

Colons are used after an independent clause. What is an independent clause? It is a sentence that can stand alone as a complete thought. The colon is often used for listing things, before quotations that are three or more lines, and in place of a semicolon between two related independent clauses.

> *Example A:* You may need the following items to go camping: a sleeping bag, a tent, a blanket, clean undies, and marshmallows.
> *Example B:* This is best described by Maslow in his paper "A Theory of Human Motivation":
>> What a man can be, he must be. This need we may call self-actualization…It refers to the desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming.
> *Example C:* It's been snowing for three days straight: The roads around here aren't very safe for driving.

How **not** to use a colon

> *Incorrect example:* The grocery list included: apples, grapes, milk, bread, and eggs.

"The grocery list included" is not an independent clause, so it cannot be used with a colon—even if it is listing something after!

Dashes

Dashes replace commas, semicolons, colons, and parentheses for added emphasis, or an interruption/abrupt change of thought.

> Quick Tip: To make a dash in Microsoft Word, type two hypens (--) directly after a word, then type the next word right after the two hypens—no spaces!

> *Example A:* Dogs—particularly pure breeds—are prone to health problems.
> *Example B:* We had a magical time, dancing the night away—but wait, where were you?
> *Example C:* I was going to tell you that—hold on, someone is at the door.

Related Resources
Purdue OWL: https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/6/
Grammarly Handbook: http://www.grammarly.com/handbook/