Semicolons and Colons

You probably have been taught that a semicolon is a pause that is slightly longer than a comma but shorter than a period. You would be correct. You also probably know that a colon has the same hard pause as a period. Again, you would be correct. But what is a pause? Unless you are a master of rhythm and meter, this rule of thumb will lead you wrong more often than it will lead you right. The truth, however, is the semicolon in not used very often, and the rules for its use are fairly simple. The colon is used even less often, and its rules are even simpler. So instead of trying to sing our sentences and measure the pause, here are the most common rules for the colon and semicolon.

Use a colon in a sentence...

When you have an appositive at the end of a sentence, and you want to add emphasis or formality. Think of an appositive as a word or phrase that you want to draw attention to. In these situations a comma would work, but a colon adds effect and/or formality.

- It was his favorite thing on earth: working on grammar. (Correct)
  - It was his favorite thing on earth, working on grammar. (Correct but less dramatic)
- He is the President of the United States: Barack Obama. (Correct)
  - He is the President of the United States, Barack Obama. (Correct but informal)

After a clause that is a complete sentence and before a list.

- He had many things to do: write his paper, visit the writing center, proof it on his own, and turn it in. (Correct)
- There are many parts of English: nouns, verbs, propositions, articles, adverbs, and adjectives. (Correct)
- The parts of English include: nouns, verbs, propositions, articles, adverbs, and adjectives. (Incorrect)
  - The parts of English include. (This is a fragment so it would be incorrect to use a colon before the list)

Before a long quote, and if the signal phrase is a complete sentence.

- Alex had a lot to say about writing: “Long quote.” (Correct)
- Alex said: “Long quote.” (Incorrect)
  - “Alex said” Is a fragment.
Semicolons and Colons continued...

Use a semicolon when…

You have two independent clauses, complete sentences, with a close relation and are not connected by a conjunction.

Semicolons are frustrating; I am pulling my hair out. (Correct)

The relation between the actions are close

Semicolons are frustrating. I am pulling my hair out. (Correct)

This works too, but the semicolon draws greater connectivity to the two actions.

Semicolons are frustrating, I am pulling my hair out. (Incorrect)

This is a comma splice. Connecting these two clauses with a comma requires the conjunction “and.”

You have two independent clauses, complete sentences, connected by a conjunctive adverb (however, although, therefore, likewise…)

The writing center is helpful; however, I wish I could go more than once a week. (Correct)

The writing center is helpful, however, I wish I could go more than once a week. (Incorrect)

Because the (,) after “helpful” could be a (.), the sentence is incorrect.

The writing center is helpful. However, I wish I could go more than once a week. (Correct)

In this sentence “however” is an adverb and not a conjunctive adverb. It often sounds better, however, to imbed the adverb in the sentence.

The writing center is helpful. I wish, however, I could go more than once a week. (Correct)

You have a main clause containing internal punctuation.

I need to pick up milk, bread, and cheese at the store; my pants and shirts at the drycleaners; and my kids from school. (Correct)

If the (;)s were (,)s it would be really hard to read the sentence.

I need to pick up milk, bread, and cheese at the store, my pants, shirts, and coats at the drycleaners, and my kids from school. (Incorrect)