THE COLON

HUMBER
Liberal Arts & Sciences

You can use a colon after an independent statement when you want to introduce something that answers a question raised by that statement. Many people associate the colon with lists, but in fact a colon can introduce any group of words, even a single word. In some cases a colon can introduce an entire clause. Consider the following sentence:

There is one thing I hate about my school.

Readers of the above statement will have a question in their minds: What do you hate? The writer can use a colon at the end of that statement and answer the readers' question.

There is one thing I hate about my school: parking.

In some cases, a writer will answer the readers' question with another independent statement.

There is one thing I hate about my school: the parking fees are far too high.

Sometimes the writer will include a list after a colon, especially when the statement before it mentions more than one thing.

There are three things I hate about my school: the parking fees, the cafeteria food, and the endless stairs to the lab.

Warning:

While you can place a colon after a heading, as in the above warning sign, you can place a colon inside a sentence **only** after an independent clause. In other words, the colon can be put only in places where a period would fit.

Verb words like *are* and *include* do not usually end a statement and should not be followed by a colon. The colon should **not** be used in the examples below:

The cafeteria menu for today includes pea soup, shrimp salad and chicken à la queen.

My three most difficult subjects are calculus, physics and political science.

In the above sentences, it would not be possible to put a period after *includes* or *are*; therefore, a colon should not be used in those positions either.

Review

The colon follows an *independent clause* and introduces one of three things:

- a **list**
- one or more **examples**

- a **quotation**

The statement that precedes the colon must be a complete sentence (an independent clause). Therefore, a colon can never come immediately after **is** or **are**. For example, using a colon in the following sentence is *incorrect* because the statement before the colon is not a complete sentence.

> *Two things I cannot stand in life are: cats and brussel sprouts.*

The colon, then, follows a complete sentence and introduces a list, or example(s), or a quotation that amplifies something in that statement. The information following the colon often answers the question "what?" or "who?"

> *There are two things I cannot stand: (**what?**) cats and Brussels sprouts.*

> *He peered into the clear water to see the person he loved most in the world: (**who?**) himself.*

> *Business, industry, and government now face a new challenge: (**what?**) the North American Free Trade Agreement.*

> *Stephen Leacock did not think very highly of his readers' taste in literature: "There are only two subjects that appeal nowadays to the general public: murder, sex; and, for people of culture, sex-murder."*

Exercise 1

Insert colons if necessary.

1. This year's winner of the Klutz Cup is Cal Cope!

2. Our only regret was the absence of our good friend, Beatrice.

3. It's too late now to realize what we should have brought flashlights, matches and toilet paper.

4. In our trek through the bush, we found that the two most common types of trees are white pine and spruce.

5. Teresa's greatest barrier to success, the one factor she seems unable to overcome, is herself.

6. Consider the alternatives take the money and feel guilty, or refuse it and starve.

7. I'd love to attend your wedding; however, that evening I am scheduled to wash my hair.

8. There is an exception to your rule the films of Woody Allen.

9. Four of my favourite television characters are Fred, Wilma, Barney, and Betty.

10. Whom do you trust no one at all.

11. There is one subject that will arouse heated debate capital punishment.

12. Everyone wants to hire her for her intelligence and style.

13. It's too bad she's only interested in one thing power.

14. We're having some visitors this weekend Barb, David, and Aaron.

15. The economy was battered by crushing interest rates, sagging production, and cross-border shopping.

16. Tim picked up a new skill in Kingston Penitentiary terrorizing weaker inmates.

17. The warden presented him with an ultimatum "Smarten up or it's solitary for you!"

18. Rudolf's needs in life were sex, drugs and rock 'n roll.

Review Exercises

Insert or delete colons if necessary in the following sentences.

1. There are two things wrong with your scheme: the distance and the expense.

2. The two things that I would really enjoy right now are a cold drink and a full wallet.

3. After all the effort and time she had spent on the project, Wanda had to admit there was only one thing that she had gained experience.

4. They told us exactly what we did not want to hear "There is no beer left in the province."

5. Since 1988, the year I got my first license, the only car I have ever driven, and the only car I ever want to drive is: a Camaro.

6. Only two teams ever really interested him, and both have disappeared the Montreal Alouettes and the Toronto Toros.

7. They were the world's strongest man, the world's fastest runner, and the world's smartest woman.

8. There are many ways for a student to succeed in school such as: studying hard, attending classes, and keeping accurate notes.

9. Today, for the first time this term, I will accomplish something that has been an important goal: I will go home without any homework.

10. Pushing yourself to the limit all the time will have an inevitable result burnout.