Western Writing Support Centre

The Colon and Dash

Though they look quite different, the colon and dash serve the same basic function in writing: they reveal information or description. In some cases, the way in which this information is revealed determines whether you should use a colon or dash, but in those cases where either could be used, **the colon is considered more acceptable for academic writing.**

The most common use of the colon is to introduce a formal series of actions or items at the end of a complete sentence. Usually, these formal series are preceded by transitional words and phrases like **the following**, **as follows**, or **namely these**.

Ex. To qualify for the scholarship, applicants must complete the following training modules: Introductory Management, Leadership Principles, Group Dynamics, and Task Orientation.

Note: Transitional words and phrases NOT used before a colon are **such as**, **including**, **like** and **for example**. These phrases already have the function of revealing new information and do not require additional punctuation to fulfill this role.

Dashes can also be used to introduce a series, but in this case the series appears **in the middle** of a complete sentence rather than at the end of the sentence.

Ex. The team used every method at their disposal – multi-tasking, overnight sessions, blind panic – to meet the impending deadline.

OR

Ex. The applicants had to complete many training modules – Introductory Management, Leadership Principles, Group Dynamics – to qualify for the scholarship.

Notice that the tone of the sentence that uses dashes, when compared to the above sentence using a colon, is somewhat less formal.

Dashes can emphasize a particular idea.

Ex. Joanne made little effort to finish the report – little effort at all!

Again, notice that the tone of the above example is less formal than sentences that use colons to achieve the same type of emphasis.

Ex. Joanne did not finish the report for one reason: little effort.

In this second example, the colon is used not only to emphasize the idea of "little effort", but also to introduce that idea for the first time. You must decide whether to use a colon or dash in these types of sentences depending on **the assignment**, **its requirements in terms of tone**, and on **where** you want to place **the emphasis**.

Colons frequently introduce long, formal quotations without speaker tags like *said* or *says*.

Ex. **When writing a paper, the student remembered Churchill's words: "There is no such thing as public opinion. There is only published opinion."**

Lastly, dashes indicate breaks in thought.

Ex. **I told my boss – or was it my mother – that I was ready for a vacation.**

Practice Exercise

Revise the following by adding colons or dashes where necessary.

1. The team's proposal lacked one important feature a point.
2. Jane's Nokia had everything size, speed, versatility that Jane looked for in a cell phone.
3. My niece is a big fan of Twitter whatever that is!
4. We will need the following documents on our trip our passports, our landing visas, and our travel permits.
5. I am often reminded of my father's advice "Why put off until tomorrow something you can ignore today?"

Answers

1. The team's proposal lacked one important feature: a point.
2. Jane's Nokia had everything – size, speed, versatility – that Jane looked for in a cell phone.
3. My niece is a big fan of Twitter – whatever that is!
4. We will need the following documents on our trip: our passports, our landing visas, and our travel permits.
5. I am often reminded of my father's advice: "Why put off until tomorrow something you can ignore today?"