



DOUGLAS COLLEGE

Learning Centre

## COLONS :

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Colons are used mainly for introducing lists and long quotations. This handout explains these and other uses of the colon.

### Lists

The colon is used to introduce a list after a complete sentence. Here are some examples:

We have three levels of government: municipal, provincial and national.

The biscuit recipe calls for these ingredients: flour, butter, baking powder, and milk.

Although the battle at Dieppe was a disaster, it served some useful purposes: it distracted the enemy from the Eastern front, it taught the Allies about the importance of reconnaissance, and it gave the inactive Canadian troops in Britain something to do.

### Long Quotations

Colons are also used to introduce long quotations. Here is an example:

Bettelheim (1975) explains the importance of fairy tales to children's development:

Today, as in the past, the minds of both creative and average children can be opened to an appreciation of all the higher things in life by fairy tales, from which they can move easily to enjoying the greatest works of literature and art. (p. 23)

### Other Uses of the Colon

The other uses of the colon are very specific.

- Colons are used to follow salutations in formal and business letters.  
Dear Dr. Jones:
  - Colons are used between the hour and the minutes in time expressions.  
6:45 p.m.
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- Colons are used between main titles and sub-titles.  
A book I found very useful for writing my paper was Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*.

## Common Errors in Colon Use

1. A colon should not come after a verb like *is* or *are*. This is wrong because a complete sentence is needed before a colon.

This is wrong:

The causes of Cathy's success are: her intelligence, her hard-working approach, and her high level of motivation.

Explanation: "*The causes of Cathy's success are*" is not a complete sentence.

This is fine:

Cathy is successful for a number of reasons: her intelligence, her hard-working approach, and her high level of motivation.

Explanation: "*Cathy is successful for a number of reasons*" is a complete sentence.

You may see examples of colons being used after incomplete sentences in novels, newspapers and magazines, but in formal academic writing, you must have a complete sentence before a colon.

2. A colon cannot be used to introduce a list in the middle of a sentence, only at the end of a sentence.

This is wrong:

John bought some groceries: tea, eggs and lettuce, for his mother.

This is fine:

John bought his mother some groceries: tea, eggs and lettuce.

3. A colon cannot be used to separate complete sentences. A semi-colon (;) is used for that.

This is wrong:           He loves her: she loves him.

This is fine:             He loves her; she loves him.

**Exercise:**

*Add colons, commas and semi-colons as needed to the following\*:*

1. The experiment only required two pieces of equipment a beaker and a Bunsen burner.
2. His two favourite hockey teams are the Vancouver Canucks and the Toronto Maple Leafs.
3. She gave him a beautiful book called *Solstice The Art of Roy Henry Vickers*.
4. Students can find textbook reading a problem for a number of reasons they may find the material uninteresting they may feel they need to remember everything and they may find that reading takes too much time in their busy lives.
5. These problems can often be solved if students use active reading strategies.
6. The store is open from 9 30 a.m. to 6 00 p.m.
7. Vickers (1988) describes the importance of eagles in his art  
Being born into the Eagle Clan has caused me to design many eagles. Having lived on the coast all my life has also given me many opportunities to observe eagles in many different situations. These experiences include a pet that friends had when I was a boy. (28)
8. She travelled to five small towns in British Columbia Nakusp Horsefly, Osoyoos Salmo and Princeton.
9. He often goes fishing on the weekend unfortunately he rarely catches anything.
10. This weekend he has two goals to finish his term paper and to study for his quiz.

**For more practice, see:**

Learning Centre handouts: GR7.20 Commas - With Exercises and GR7.30 Semicolons

## The Colon – ANSWER KEY

1. The experiment only required two pieces of equipment: a beaker and a Bunsen burner.
2. His two favourite hockey teams are the Vancouver Canucks and the Toronto Maple Leafs. (no colon required)
3. She gave him a beautiful book called *Solstice: The Art of Roy Henry Vickers*.
4. Students can find textbook reading a problem for a number of reasons: they may find the material uninteresting they may feel they need to remember everything and they may find that reading takes too much time in their busy lives.
5. These problems can often be solved if students use active reading strategies. (no colon required)
6. The store is open from **9:30** a.m. to **6:00** p.m.
7. Vickers (1988) describes the importance of eagles in his art:  
Being born into the Eagle Clan has caused me to design many eagles. Having lived on the coast all my life has also given me many opportunities to observe eagles in many different situations. These experiences include a pet that friends had when I was a boy. (28)
8. She travelled to five small towns in British Columbia: Nakusp, Horsefly, Osoyoos, Salmo, and Princeton.
9. He often goes fishing on the weekend; unfortunately, he rarely catches anything.
10. This weekend he has two goals: to finish his term paper and to study for his quiz.