Colons ( : )

Colons signal the reader that additional information will follow to elaborate on or to explain a statement. Colons are also used to introduce lists, tables, words, and formal quotations and to show time and ratios.

To elaborate or explain

Rule #1:

Use a colon after a complete statement if you go further and elaborate on or explain the statement. The information that follows the colon may or may not be a complete statement. If the information that follows the colon is a complete statement, begin the statement with a capital letter.

Examples of Rule #1:

Using this program is simple: Open the book and begin.
The best part of the week has begun: the weekend.

With lists

Rule #2:

Use a colon after a complete statement that introduces a numbered or unnumbered horizontal list.

Examples of Rule #2:

We saw several cars: a Honda, a Ford, and a Toyota.
We saw several cars: (1) a Ford, (2) a Chrysler, and (3) a Honda.

DO NOT use a colon (or any other punctuation) if the complete statement is followed by a transitional word or phrase such as namely, for example, for instance, or however. In this case, use a semicolon before the transitional word and a comma after it.

We have discussed two options; namely, (1) printing or (2) photocopying.

Rule #3:

Use a colon after a statement that introduces a horizontal or vertical list and includes the words the following, as follows, these, or thus.

Examples of Rule #3:

We saw the following cars: a BMW, a Jaguar, and a Porsche.

DO NOT use a colon (or any other punctuation) if a horizontal list is introduced by an incomplete sentence. In this case, items in the list complete the sentence.
Processing the order requires (1) recording the stock numbers, (2) printing the packing.

Rule #4:

Use a colon after a complete statement that introduces a numbered, unnumbered, or bulleted vertical list.

Examples of Rule #4:

You should know these rules:
1. The deadline for applications is July 1.
2. Handwritten applications will not be accepted.

DO NOT use a colon (or any other punctuation) if a vertical list is introduced by an incomplete sentence. In this case, items in the list complete the sentence.

Two types of printers are
1. laser
2. inkjet

With quotations

Rule #5:

Use a colon to introduce a long quotation. Capitalize the first word of the quotation.

Examples of Rule #5:

In her speech she said: "Success can be measured in many ways. I believe success is finding what you love and making it your life's work."

Other uses

Rule #6:

Use a colon in the following specific instances:

Examples of Rule #6:

1. Between hours and minutes in time: 12:30
2. To substitute for the word to in a ratio: 5:1
3. After business letter salutations: Dear Mr. Adams: