

Sentence variety exercise 3

Colon

A colon is used only when an independent clause states something in general terms, and what follows the colon provides specific explanation. The independent clause **before** the colon must set up expectations that are fulfilled **after** it. The explanation may be in the form of another independent clause, a dependent phrase or clause, a list, or a single item or word. Consider the following examples:

1) independent clause: independent clause

independent clause

independent clause

- My cousin Wallace has one peculiar characteristic: he wears a size seven shoe on his left foot and a size ten on his right foot.

Prior to the colon, the independent clause sets up the expectation to discover Wallace's "one peculiar characteristic." Following the colon is another independent clause specifying Wallace's "peculiar characteristic."

2) independent clause: prepositional phrase

independent clause

prepositional phrase

- Stan feels fulfilled in only one place: under the hood of his grandpa's 1960 Chevy Bel Air.

independent clause

prepositional

- Shakespeare's *Hamlet* poses a surprisingly existential question: "To be or not to be, that is the question."

phrase

be, that is the question."

3) independent clause: list

independent clause

list

- I have an irrational fear of common things: potholders, spark plugs, and golf tees.

4) independent clause: single item or word

independent clause

one item

- My favorite movie is on TV tonight: *Barney Goes to Vegas*.

independent clause

one word

- Clarence is like my three-year-old nephew: stubborn.

Beware common errors:

1) Placing a form of the verb “be” (is, are, was, were, am) immediately before the colon results in a fragment.

- At the ZZ Top concert, Anna, Misael, and Joe were: rocking.

2) Awkward, ungrammatical, or anticlimactic sentences often result when using a colon followed by logical information, but then continuing the same sentence with another independent or dependent clause.

- There’s only one way to describe Clarence: stubborn even though I’ve known people who were more bull headed than he is.

The sentence becomes less emphatic and effective when information after the word describing Clarence is added. As soon as you’ve fulfilled the expectations set up by the independent clause before the colon, end your sentence.

Practice 1

Directions: For 1-5 below, decide if the colon is used correctly. If it is, leave the sentence alone; if it’s not, correct it.

1. Each night before retiring, Carlos follows a strict routine for personal hygiene: he flosses and brushes his teeth, rinses his mouth with Listerine, gives his hair one hundred strokes with a brush, trims his nose and ear hair, and rubs moisturizer on his elbows and knees.
2. Last Saturday night we were: bored.
3. The most exciting movie of the summer that I went to: *Spiderman 2*.
4. Horseback riding usually leaves me: sore and sunburned.
5. When five inches of rain fell on Tuesday, I made a huge mistake: I left the sunroof on my 1983 Honda open.

Practice 2

Directions: Write two examples of each of the following: the colon followed by an independent clause, by a dependent phrase or clause, a list, one item, and one word.