Use a colon when an independent clause states something in general terms and what follows the colon provides specific explanation. 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**
   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 “peculiar characteristic.” Following the colon is another independent clause specifying Wallace’s “peculiar characteristic.”

2. **independent clause: prepositional phrase**

   **independent clause**
   Stan feels fulfilled in only one place: under the hood of his grandpa’s 1960 Chevy Bel Air.

   The independent clause before the colon sets up the expectation to find out where Stan feels “fulfilled.” Following the colon is a prepositional phrase that identifies where Stan feels “fulfilled.”

3. **independent clause: list**

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

   Similar to the examples above, the independent clause sets up the list. The reader finds out what things the writer fears after the colon.

4. **independent clause: single item or word**

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

   The independent clause leads the reader to what the writer’s favorite movie is.
Beware Common Errors

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

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

The work “rocking” is needed to complete the fragment; it must be placed before the colon.

CORRECT  At the ZZ Top concert, Ana, Misael, and Joe were rocking.

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.

independent clause                    one word              sentence continues

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

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

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

Practice 1

Directions: Decide if the colon is used correctly in the sentences below. If it’s not, correct it.

1. Each night before retiring, Rebecca follows a strict routine for personal hygiene: she flosses and brushes her teeth, rinses her mouth with Listerine, strokes her hair 100 times, and rubs cream on her elbows and knees.

2. Last Saturday night we were: bored.

3. Horseback riding usually leaves me: sore and sunburned.

4. 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: a colon followed by an independent clause, a dependent phrase or clause, a list, one item, and one word.