

The Colon

The colon (:) is generally used in four situations:

- In the titles of articles and books
- To introduce a list of items
- To introduce a quotation
- To introduce an explanation or the answer to an implied question

Titles of Articles and Books

Books and articles often have two-part titles, and the two parts of the title are separated by a colon. Here are some examples.

Academic Writing for Graduate Students: Essential Tasks and Skills
Inside Academic Writing: Understanding Audience and Becoming Part of an Academic Community
Academic Writing: Exploring Processes and Strategies

To Introduce a List (in sentence form or in bulleted or numbered points)

If you are using a colon to introduce a list, you should put a complete sentence before the colon. Never place a colon after a partial sentence, and never place a colon between the verb and the object of the verb.

When driving in snowy weather, it is important to carry the following items: a warm blanket, warm clothes, drinking water, non-perishable food and a shovel.

A number of documents are required to apply for an I-20:

- A valid passport
- A certificate of finances
- Bank statements
- An acceptance letter from a US school or college

To Introduce a Quotation

One way to introduce a quotation is to use a complete sentence followed by a colon.

My mother lived her life according to a deeply-held belief: “No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.”

Most Americans are familiar with the words spoken by President Kennedy at his inaugural address: “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”



To Introduce an Explanation or the Answer to an Implied Question

The best time to use a colon is to introduce an explanation or the answer to an implied question. (Very often the explanation is the answer to an implied question). Here are some examples:

Newcomers to Georgia often ask me the same question: What does “y’all” mean?

The soldiers were faced with a problem they had not anticipated: Their high-tech weapons were ineffective without reliable internet access.

If we don’t do something to reduce greenhouse gases, the consequences are inevitable: sea levels will rise all over the world and many coastal areas will be under water.

Many people think they need just one thing to be happier: money.

Do you need a complete sentence before a colon?

Yes! With the exception of titles, you should have a complete sentence after a colon

Do you need a complete sentence after a colon?

No. A colon can be followed either by a complete sentence or by a noun or noun phrase.

Capitalization after Colons

After a colon, you can use either a lower-case or upper-case (capital) letter. If the colon is followed by a complete sentence, you may choose to use an upper-case letter, but it is not essential. You can choose whichever you prefer.