

Colons and semicolons

Punctuation marks that help show relationships between phrases within a sentence.

Colons can introduce an explanation.

“Life is like a box of chocolates: you never know what you’re gonna get.”

What follows the Colon explains why life is like a box of chocolates.

A semicolon can link two related phrases.

“He picked the strawberry cream; his favourite.”

Semicolons are a bit like a soft full stop. They allow two related phrases to flow together; instead of them being separate sentences.

Some writers shy away from semicolons, while others, like Robert Louis Stevenson, scatter them generously throughout their writing.

In ‘Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde’, Stevenson compares the two characters: “Jekyll had more than a father's interest; Hyde had more than a son's indifference.”

Grammatically, this semicolon could be replaced with a full stop and would still make sense, but Jekyll and Hyde are really the same person, and as Stevenson compares both their similarities and differences, it’s more effective to join these two phrases using a semicolon.

Later, Stevenson further explores the idea of duality:

“I have been doomed to such a dreadful shipwreck: that man is not truly one, but truly two”

Here, a colon is used to introduce an explanation, and expand on the idea of the shipwreck.

The ‘dreadful shipwreck’ Stevenson refers to is the burden of Dr Jekyll’s split personality, and the fact that eventually, it’ll destroy him.

Colons and semicolons have many uses: explanations, quotes, lists. Not just eyes for your smiley faces!