THE COLON

Related Handouts: TERMS TO KNOW: Vital Sentence Elements; APPOSITIVES; COMMA SPLICES AND RUN-ON SENTENCES

THE PRINCIPLE

The general purpose of the colon is this: it says, STOP! Important clump of words dead ahead! The colon serves to introduce an explanation, an example, an appositive, a series, a list, or a quotation. The colon is a signal for the reader to expect upcoming information. The colon always comes after a completed independent clause.

THE PROBLEM/SOLUTION

Here are some sentences with missing or misused colons followed by a brief explanation and the corrected sentence.

1. Ideology is like the force, it surrounds us, binds us, and connects us.

   This sentence needs a colon after the word “force.” The information after the colon clarifies or explains the first part of the sentence. In addition, this sentence actually contains two independent clauses. Joining them with a comma creates a comma splice error.

   Ideology is like the force: it surrounds us, binds us, and connects us.

2. Yoda expects results beyond mere effort “Do or do not; there is no try.”

   If an independent clause precedes your quotation, use a colon. This is also another example of an explanation that follows a colon. What’s after the colon is the crucial information that the writer wants the reader to understand.

   Yoda expects results beyond mere effort: “Do or do not; there is no try.”

3. There seems to be an abundance of films in the Star Wars series such as: A New Hope, The Empire Strikes Back, Return of the Jedi, Phantom Menace, Attack of the Clones, and now Revenge of the Sith.

   When listing items, do not use a colon after “such as” or “include” or “including” because the independent clause in not yet complete.
There seems to be an abundance of films in the Star Wars series, such as *A New Hope*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Return of the Jedi*, *Phantom Menace*, *Attack of the Clones*, and now *Revenge of the Sith*.

4. My favorite moments in *Star Wars* include: Han Solo’s carbonite nap, Luke’s visit to Dagobah, and Princess Leia’s big hair.

This is another example of a list.

   *My favorite moments in *Star Wars* include Han Solo’s carbonite nap, Luke’s visit to Dagobah, and Princess Leia’s big hair.*

In another example of a list, you can use a colon after the phrase “the following” because the phrase completes the independent clause.

   *My favorite moments in *Star Wars* include the following: Han Solo’s carbonite nap, Luke’s visit to Dagobah, and Princess Leia’s big hair.*

5. At the Cantina, Luke was stunned by Obi-Wan’s decision to hire a character of such low repute, the notorious but skilled Han Solo.

Although using a comma after the word “repute” is correct, the information comes at the end of the sentence and functions as an appositive (it renames and describes the character of low repute). It can, therefore, be set off with a colon for added emphasis.

   *At the Cantina, Luke was stunned by Obi-Wan’s decision to hire a character of such low repute: the notorious but skilled Han Solo.*