

## Comma, Semicolon, and Colon Usage

The **COMMA** chiefly separates both equal and unequal sentence elements.

- **It separates main clauses when they are linked by a coordinating conjunction.**  
An airline once tried to boost sales by advertising the tense alertness of its crew, **but** nervous fliers did not want to hear about pilots' sweaty palms.
- **It separates subordinate information that is part of or attached to a main clause, such as a nonrestrictive modifier or an introductory element.**  
Although the airline campaign failed, many advertising agencies, **including some clever ones**, copied its underlying message.
- **It separates items in a series.**  
Three industries that have been important to New England are **shipbuilding, tourism, and commercial fishing**.

The **SEMICOLON** chiefly separates equal and balanced sentence elements.

- **It separates complementary main clauses that are *not* linked by a coordinating conjunction.**  
The airline campaign had highlighted only half of the story; the other half was buried in copy.
- **It separates complementary main clauses that are related by a conjunctive adverb.**  
The campaign should not have stressed the seller's insecurity; **instead**, the campaign should have stressed the improved performance resulting from the insecurity.
- **It separates items in a series when the items contain commas.**  
The committee included the following individuals: Dr. Curtis Youngblood, the county medical examiner; Roberta Cunningham, the director of the bureau's criminal division; and Darcy Coolidge, the chief of police.

The **COLON** chiefly separates unequal sentence elements and introduces lists, appositives, and quotations.

- **It separates a main clause from a following explanation or summary, not necessarily a complete main clause.**  
Many successful advertising campaigns have used this message: anxious seller is harder working and smarter than the competition.
- **It introduces lists, appositives, and quotations (almost always preceded by complete sentences).**  
The novel deals with three kinds of futility: pervasive poverty, unrequited love, and inescapable aging.

Maimon, Elaine P. and Janice H. Peritz. *A Writer's Resource: A Handbook for Writing and Research*. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003.

