Semicolons and Colons

To use this handout, you must first understand the difference between an independent clause and a dependent clause.

- An independent clause is a phrase that contains a subject and verb and that can stand alone as a complete sentence.

- A dependent clause is a phrase that does not contain a subject and a verb, cannot stand alone as a complete sentence, and must be reworded or attached to an independent clause to form a complete sentence.

Use a semicolon

- To connect two independent clauses using "transition words" (such as consequently, however, moreover, besides, nevertheless, on the other hand, in fact, therefore, or thus).

  Example: I'm not hungry; therefore, I'd rather not go to dinner with you.

- To connect two independent clauses.

  Example: I don't want to go to dinner with you tonight; I'm not hungry.

- To separate a dependent clause from an independent clause.

  Example: After the vote, our school colors will be either red, white and blue; green and gold; or marigold, chartreuse, and eggshell.

Use a colon

- To introduce a second, closely related independent clause when it explains the first part of the sentence:

  Example: I do know this: that child is not my son.

- To introduce a list after an independent clause (as long as the list does not separate the subject and verb or other necessary parts of the sentence). The colon states "that is."

  Example: You can count on two things in life: death and taxes.

- To introduce a quotation.

  Example: The Gettysburg Address is often quoted: "Four score and seven years ago..."