Colons and Semicolons

Problem

Writers who are unfamiliar with the conventions for using colons (:) and semicolons (;) may use them interchangeably or substitute another mark of punctuation (like a period or comma). Misused colons and semicolons can alter the structure of your sentences and make your writing confusing for readers.

Solutions

Use a colon to . . .

1) Introduce a list or a quotation at the end of a complete sentence.
   Example: She has lived in countries all over the world: China, Cambodia, Argentina, and New Zealand.
   Example: Most of these authors would likely concur with Victor Villanueva’s definition of hegemony: “the ways in which the ruling classes affect a society’s moral and intellectual leaderships so as to have the rulers’ interests appear to be the interests of other social groups” (Villanueva 625).

2) Connect titles and subtitles.
   Example: Writing as Re-Vision: A Student’s Anthology

3) Connect two sentences when the second is a restatement or explanation of the first.
   Example: Minds are like parachutes: they only work when open.

4) Mark salutations (Dear Mr. Smith:), time notation (5:30), ratios (They have a 2:1 success rate), titles (EngC 1011: Introduction to College Writing), or biblical citations (John 3:16).

Use a semicolon to . . .

1) Connect two complete sentences that are closely related in meaning.
   Example: The party was fabulous; she hadn’t anticipated having such a good time.

2) Connect complex items in a list.
   Example: Today I have to clean my room; go to the grocery store to buy bread, milk, and eggs; and make sure to get all of my homework done.