Colons vs. Dashes

Use a colon after words such as ‘the following’ (there needs to be an independent clause\(^1\) before the colon).

- Correct: The party needs the following items: food, drink and decorations.
- Incorrect: The party needs the following items—food, drink and decorations.

Use a dash after a series of words that give details about the statement after the dash.

- Correct: Food, drink and decorations—that’s what the party needs.
- Incorrect: Food, drink and decorations: that’s what the party needs.

Use a colon to indicate a quotation that is formally announced.

- Correct: Billy once made this statement: “Psalms is better than Proverbs.”
- Incorrect: Billy once made this statement—“Psalms is better than Proverbs.”

Use a dash to break off a sentence or show faltering speech.

- Correct: “Some time or other he will be—but it shall not be by me\(^2\).”
- Incorrect: “Some time or other he will be: but it shall not be by me.”

Use a colon between independent clauses when the second clause modifies the first.

- Correct: Julie seemed to really enjoy the concert: she came back a changed person.
- Incorrect: Julie seemed to really enjoy the concert—she came back a changed person.

Use a dash to emphasize a specific portion.

- Correct: After the show—beautiful as they were—we took the decorations down.
- Incorrect: After the show: beautiful as they were: we took the decorations down.

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\(^1\) An independent clause is one that does not modify anything and can stand alone as a complete sentence