

# Section IV—Punctuation: Capitalization, the Colon vs. the Semicolon, the Hyphen and the Dash

Don't get called out on improper punctuation.

## > WHAT GETS CAPITALIZED?

Capital letters are used to indicate two things:

**The beginning of a sentence**  
**–and–**  
**The use of a proper noun**

Proper nouns refer specifically to the name or title of a certain person, place, or thing.

When a proper noun incorporates multiple words, all of the major words are capitalized. We don't capitalize articles such as "a," "and," "of," and "the," so long as they do not begin the proper noun.

The pronoun "I" is always capitalized.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY ROBERT DUNLAVEY

## Typical proper nouns include:

names of people	Bob, Janice
their titles	Doctor, Mrs.
continents	Africa
countries	Belgium
states	North Dakota
cities	Fort Worth
other geographic area names	Ulster County, Lincoln Township
days of the week	Wednesday
months	August
holidays	Christmas
titles of artistic works	The Venus de Milo
titles of scientific works	The Kinsey Report
titles of books, movies, and plays	The Terminator, The Catcher in the Rye
names of schools	University of Michigan
names of institutions	St. Vincent's Hospital
names of government agencies	National Aeronautic and Space Administration
names of brands	Kleenex, Chrysler, Sony
names of magazines	Sports Illustrated
festivals	The West Virginia Strawberry Festival
events	The Super Bowl, Woodstock



## &gt; THE COLON VS. THE SEMICOLON

One of the most perplexing punctuation rules for most of us is when to use a colon or semicolon. The semicolon is like a more powerful comma, while the colon is shorthand for “as follows.”

Use the semicolon when you have two clauses that join to make a sentence but are not separated by a conjunction such as *or*, *but*, or *and*.

*Her last three albums had sold over one million copies each; the next one would be even bigger.*

The semicolon also is used to separate groupings or lists that themselves contain commas. For example:

*He packed the van first with his clothing, shoes and toiletries; then his kitchen pots and pans, silverware, plates, and utensils; and finally the bigger items and furniture.*

The colon is used to indicate that a list or example is about to follow. However, the colon should only be used if that list clarifies or illustrates the phrase preceding the colon.

*The bank offered him multiple services: checking accounts, savings accounts, loans, credit cards.*

## &gt; THE DASH VS. THE HYPHEN

Simply put, *the dash separates, the hyphen connects.*

Use a dash to indicate a sharp break in the flow of the sentence. Dashes also can be used to set off an interjection by the narrator or speaker in the middle of a sentence, or to add an afterthought at the end.

*He couldn't believe his eyes—she was alive.*

*After much thought I agreed to appear—hard to believe, I know—on reality TV.*

*Having been convicted and sentenced to death, his days were numbered—or so it seemed.*

The hyphen is used to connect two words and make them a single unit known as a compact word.

*He knew his opponent to be a bald-faced liar.*

*She always dreaded family picnics with her brother-in-law.*

The hyphen also is used when a word is broken by the end of a line of writing or typing. When this happens and the word is to be continued on the next line, break the word between syllables and insert a hyphen at the end of the first line to indicate that a continuation of the broken word is to follow.

*When using a hyphen, always break between syllables.*

## Using the colon and semicolon

Practice using the colon and semicolon by indicating which one belongs in each of the following sentences:

He held her tightly \_\_\_ he was not prepared to lose her forever.

Every night she sent him to the supermarket for her “essentials” \_\_\_ a cup of tea, a pint of ice cream, and a bag of baby carrots.

In the morning he made his usual stops at the bank, the cleaners, and the post office \_\_\_ at his friend Mark's house, his friend LouAnn's house, and his sister's place \_\_\_ and at the cemetery where his mother and father were buried.