Colons

Although the colon has other uses in writing, its most important function is to act as a signal to the reader--it says something like "Okay, reader! Here it comes!" For example:

• To make a kite, you need the following items: string, paper, thin sticks, glue, and scissors.

Notice the words before the colon make a complete statement, at least grammatically. Here are some additional examples:

• The main engines of the Space Shuttle consist of six main components: the external tank, the low-pressure turbo pump, the high-pressure turbo pumps, the pre-burners, the combustion chamber, and the nozzle.
• Hurricane size is expressed in three ways: the strength of the maximum winds, the diameter of the hurricane-force winds, the diameter of the gale-force winds, and the overall size the cyclone circulation.
• To make a metal dashboard, three steps are required: (1) the metal must be stamped; (2) the texture must be stamped into the metal; and (3) the part must be painted.

Notice in the last example that the first sentence introduces a series of complete sentences. In fact, you can use the colon to connect two complete sentences--as long as the first sentence introduces or prepares for the second. Here are some examples of this possibility:

• The grades of the students in the caffeine research project told a dramatic story: The higher the caffeine intake, the lower the grades, both for semester and overall grade point average.
• In general, shelf-life increases as the cell size of the battery becomes smaller: With well constructed cells, shelf-lives of three years with a No. 6 telephone cell and ten years with a penlight cell are possible.
• The line-of-sight in a communication satellite can be a problem: Communication satellites can see the earth's surface only between about 83 degrees north latitude and 83 degrees south latitude.
• Many of the new applications of microcomputers are "interactive": There is frequent interaction between the computer and one or more users.

Notice that the first word of an independent clause following a colon is capitalized.
Also use a colon to introduce a concluding explanation, a series, an appositive, or a long or formal quotation.

Here is an example of a colon being used to introduce a concluding explanation:

- Soul food has a deceptively simple definition: the ethnic cooking of African Americans.

Sometimes a concluding explanation is preceded by "the following" or "as follows" and a colon.
- A more precise definition might be the following: Soul food draws on ingredients, cooking methods, and dishes originating in Africa and supplemented by Caribbean and South American peoples.

As we’ve already seen, a colon is sometimes used to introduce a list or series:
- At least three soul food dishes are familiar to most Americans: fried chicken, barbequed spareribs, and sweet potatoes.

Colons are also used to introduce an appositive:
- Soul food has one disadvantage: fat.

Finally, a colon is often effective in introducing a long or formal quotation:
- One soul food chef has a solution: "Soul food doesn’t have to be greasy to taste good. Instead of using ham hocks to flavor beans, I use smoked turkey wings. The soulful, smoky taste remains, but without all the fat."

There are instances when a colon should not be used. For instance, delete a colon after a verb:
- NO The best-known soul food dish is: fried chicken.
- YES The best-known soul food dish is fried chicken.

In addition, delete a colon after "such as" or "including":
- NO Americans have not tasted delicacies such as: chitlins and black-eyed peas.
- YES Americans have not tasted delicacies such as chitlins and black-eyed peas.

Moreover, don't let a colon interrupt the normal syntax and word order of a complete sentence.
- NO The typical Doppler velocity sensor consists of: a transistor, an antenna, and a receiver.
- YES The typical Doppler velocity sensor consists of a transistor, an antenna, and a receiver.