INSTRUCTOR: "Semicolons and Colons."

The semicolon and colon are types of punctuation that help readers see how one part of a sentence relates to another part. They may look and sound similar, but the semicolon and colon have different functions.

A semicolon is primarily used in two situations-- as a way to join independent clauses, and as a way to separate complicated lists of items. First, let's look at the semicolon as a joiner.

I need to get my phone repaired. The screen cracked when I dropped it. These are two complete sentences, or independent clauses. They are correct as written, but a semicolon can be used to show a closer relationship between the clauses.

I need to get my phone repaired; the screen cracked when I dropped it. The clauses are still independent, but the semicolon acts as glue to join them more closely than they were as separate sentences.

A transitional expression and a comma can be used along with a semicolon to provide more information. I need to get my phone repaired; not surprisingly, the screen cracked when I dropped it. Other common transitional expressions include in fact, moreover, nevertheless, and therefore.

Now let's look at the semicolon as a separator. When a sentence contains multiple lists, and the items in the lists include their own internal commas, separating the lists with a semicolon avoids confusion. The main dish comes with your choice of vegetable, salad, or fries; coffee, tea, or soda; and soup, appetizer, or dessert. The semicolons clearly group each mini list so that all of the food choices don't confusingly run together.

A colon can be used to introduce lists and quotations, but it may only come after an independent clause-- a group of words that can stand on its own as a sentence. Here is an example with a list. Brianna brought: hot dogs, hamburgers, rolls,

mustard, and ketchup. In this sentence, the colon that comes before the list is incorrect, because the word group that comes before it-- Brianna brought-- does not form a complete thought, so it is not an independent clause.

Brianna brought five items to the family cookout: hot dogs, hamburgers, rolls, mustard, and ketchup. Here, the word group before the colon-- Brianna brought five items to the family cookout-- does form an independent clause, so the colon is correct.

Colons are also used when inserting a quotation in your writing. Here is an example with a quotation. The speaker said: "Wherever the road of life takes you, remember where you came from." In this sentence, the colon is incorrect, because the word group that comes before it-- the speaker said-- does not form a complete thought, so it is not an independent clause.

The speaker had some wise words for the graduates: "Wherever the road of life takes you, remember where you came from." Here, the word group before the colon-- the speaker had some wise words for the graduates-- does form an independent clause which can stand on its own as a sentence, so the colon is correct.

Remember, using semicolons and colons correctly can help you show your readers how the parts of your sentences relate to each other.