The colon is one of the most helpful and easiest to use of all the punctuation marks. Two rules govern it: it must follow a complete sentence and it introduces. It can introduce just about anything: a word, a phrase, a sentence, a quotation, or a list. The colons in the two preceding sentences introduce first a sentence, second a list. Here are some other examples:

Joe has only one thing on his mind: profit.
Joe has only one thing on his mind: his stock portfolio.
Joe has only one thing on his mind: he wants to get rich.
Joe has three things on his mind: stocks, bonds, and certificates of deposit.

Colons in these four sentences introduce various kinds of things: a word, a phrase, a sentence, and a list. Colons can appear most any place to directly introduce something. A colon gives special emphasis to what follows it because they require a complete stop before proceeding, so whatever follows gets more attention. For example, a letter describes a new product that needs emphasis, such as the Jacobsen lawn mower, is reliable. The sentence could look like this:

The Jacobsen lawn mower beats its competitors especially in the key area of reliability.

While this sentence makes the point, it doesn’t place much emphasis on reliability. A sentence using a colon is much more emphatic:

The Jacobsen lawn mower beats its competitors especially in one key area: reliability.

Notice that the second example places clear emphasis on the important point: that the Jacobsen lawn mower is above all reliable. This colon is effective.

Perhaps the most common way to use a colon is to introduce a list of items, as in
This report reviews five main criteria to determine whether to purchase the IBM PC: hardware, software, maintenance agreements, service, and customer support.

To determine whether a colon could be useful in a particular sentence, here is a handy test: read the sentence, and when you reach the colon, substitute the word namely to halt the flow and bring attention to what follows; if the sentence reads smoothly with that break that the colon calls for, then a colon would more than likely help. For example, read any of the example sentences above with the word namely in the place of the colon:

Joe has only one thing on his mind [namely] profit.
Joe has only one thing on his mind [namely] his stock portfolio.
Joe has only one thing on his mind [namely] he wants to get rich.
Joe has three things on his mind [namely] stocks, bonds, and certificates of deposit.

This test may not work 100 percent of the time, but it is a fairly reliable indicator of whether you need a colon.

One word of caution: do not place the colon after the verb in a sentence, even when you are introducing something, because the verb itself introduces and the colon would be redundant. For example, you would not write:

My three favorite friends are: Evelyn, Marlyne, and Ronni.

The colon is not necessary in the sentence above because the verb does the work of introducing the three friends. Check this sentence by using the “namely” test. With the colon, the sentence reads awkwardly, “My three favorite friends are, namely, Evelyn, Marlyne, and Ronni.” Flow and style make writing effective. If the punctuation interrupt either, then it is probably unnecessary. Remember, the colon shows emphasis and, therefore, causes a break in the reading to bring attention to whatever the colon is introducing.