Comma, Semicolon, and Colon Usage

The COMMA chiefly separates both equal and unequal sentence elements.

- It separates main clauses when they are linked by a coordinating conjunction.
  An airline once tried to boost sales by advertising the tense alertness of its crew, but nervous fliers did not want to hear about pilots’ sweaty palms.

- It separates subordinate information that is part of or attached to a main clause, such as a nonrestrictive modifier or an introductory element.
  Although the airline campaign failed, many advertising agencies, including some clever ones, copied its underlying message.

- It separates items in a series.
  Three industries that have been important to New England are shipbuilding, tourism, and commercial fishing.

The SEMICOLON chiefly separates equal and balanced sentence elements.

- It separates complementary main clauses that are not linked by a coordinating conjunction.
  The airline campaign had highlighted only half of the story; the other half was buried in copy.

- It separates complementary main clauses that are related by a conjunctive adverb.
  The campaign should not have stressed the seller’s insecurity; instead, the campaign should have stressed the improved performance resulting from the insecurity.

- It separates items in a series when the items contain commas.
  The committee included the following individuals: Dr. Curtis Youngblood, the county medical examiner; Roberta Cunningham, the director of the bureau’s criminal division; and Darcy Coolidge, the chief of police.

The COLON chiefly separates unequal sentence elements and introduces lists, appositives, and quotations.

- It separates a main clause from a following explanation or summary, not necessarily a complete main clause.
  Many successful advertising campaigns have used this message: anxious seller is harder working and smarter than the competition.

- It introduces lists, appositives, and quotations (almost always preceded by complete sentences).
  The novel deals with three kinds of futility: pervasive poverty, unrequited love, and inescapable aging.