

Q. I have seen the word *myriad* used in two ways and wonder which is correct, or if both are. It is used in a statement like, “The judge had a myriad of issues to review,” and also in a statement like, “The judge had myriad issues to review.” Please help on this question.

A. Attorney David Boling, who lives in Arlington but works in Washington, D.C., sent this question, which should interest even those readers who never thought to ask it. The short answer is that when *myriad* is used as a noun, as in “a myriad of issues,” it is preceded by either the definite article (*the*) or the indefinite article (*a*)—more often the indefinite article. It can also be preceded, less often, by pronouns and adjectives, as in “those myriads” or “countless myriads.”

The noun *myriad* derives from the Greek noun *myria*, which meant 10,000 and was used as a numerical or in weights. By the 17th century, *myriad* had broadened to take on the sense of any enormous, though indefinite, number. In Hanimer’s *Ecclesiastical History* (1663), it appeared in statements like, “The number that perished by sword and famine mounted to 110 myriads.”

But *myriad* can also be an adjective, modifying nouns, as in “myriad numbers.” As an adjective, it means “a large, indefinite number.” The fifth-century poet Aeschylus described in his drama *Prometheus Bound*, “the myriad laughter of ocean waves.” The term was a favorite of 19th-century poets. Samuel Taylor Coleridge used *myriad* as both noun and adjective in the poem “Hymn to Earth,” writing of “myriad myriads of lives ...” and (in the essay “Biographia Litteraria,”) “our myriad-minded Shakespeare.” Alfred Lord Tennyson referred to deity as “Thou of the many tongues, the myriad eyes.”

The word *myriad* is not so popular among poets today, but novelist William Faulkner used it graphically in *Go Down Moses* to describe a “myriad-wrinkled face.”

Q. Please resolve a disagreement in our office concerning block [indented] quotations. We all agree that

a colon is necessary in a statement following a formal introductory clause like: “The Court stated, as follows:” But should a colon precede a quotation that flows from the introductory clause? For example:

The statute provides that it is unlawful to attempt to touch any wild American alligator, intentionally feed, or entice with feed, any wild American alligator. ...

A. The illustration the reader submitted is correctly punctuated. Grammarians agree that colons are not needed to introduce a list that is either a complement or the object of language in the introductory clause. In grammar, a *complement* is any language following the verb that completes the meaning of the previous language.

In the illustration, the language following the word *is* acts as a complement (completing the meaning of the phrase unlawful to). The language that follows “flows from the introductory clause.” Therefore, no colon is needed and would interfere with the flow of the sentence. However, the quotation the reader submitted is so short that it could be incorporated it into the text rather than indented.

Generally, longer quotations are indented, but authorities differ on the minimum length for indentation. The requirements of different publishers vary from five lines to eight to ten lines, and even to 50 words or more. My preference is to keep nonindented material as short as possible. Lengthy paragraphs tend to reduce careful reading and therefore to make mistakes more likely.

Colons are correctly used to introduce lists that do not act as a complement. “Only a few items are needed:

a computer, a printer, and a stack of paper.” Colons are also properly used before lists after introductory words like *namely*, *that is*, and *the following*. “The apartment has the following advantages: It is adjacent to a bus stop; it has two-way ventilation; and it is has a nice yard.”

From the Mailbag

Some time ago, I wrote about the use of personification in language: the endowing of human characteristics to nonhuman objects. An attorney who works for a government agency responded that writers are told to avoid personifying nonhuman entities with human characteristics because doing so impairs clarity.

That may sometimes be true, but well-crafted personification can clarify legal language and make it memorable. Here are some illustrations:

- “The courts are institutional cripples, stumbling along in the pattern of an outworn tradition, compiling a record of incredible inefficiency.” (John Lindsay, Address to the Bar of the City of New York, Feb. 21, 1970)
- “Law is the backbone which keeps man erect.” (S.C. Yuter, *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, October 1969)
- “Democracy is no harlot to be picked up in the street by a man with a tommy gun.” (Winston Churchill, *The Wisdom of Winston Churchill*, 1956)
- “Law must be stable, and yet it cannot stand still.” (Roscoe Pound, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Law*, 1922)
- “English policy is to float lazily downstream, occasionally putting out a boat-hook to avoid collisions.” (Lord Salisbury, English Prime Minister, 1855). **TFL**

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