

The Semicolon

The semicolon can be a troublesome punctuation mark because it has several different functions, nearly all of which are functions shared by other punctuation marks. For this reason, it is usually a good idea to use semicolons **sparingly** in your writing and use the more common full-stop period in all other cases. **Note:** the semicolon does NOT make your writing seem more sophisticated, so do not use it only for this purpose. Instead, be certain that you understand when it should be used.

When to Use the Semicolon:

The semicolon is often used to separate two main clauses, much like a period:

Ex. The concert was brilliant; the crowd gave the band a standing ovation.

In this example, a period would have worked just as well, but the semicolon suggests a close relationship (in this case a causal relationship) between the *ideas* of the two sentences. Here, we are to understand that the crowd applauded the band *because* the concert was brilliant.

Note: You cannot use a comma for this same purpose. Whenever you separate two independent clauses with only a comma, you have committed an error called a **comma splice**:

Ex. The concert was brilliant, the crowd gave the band a standing ovation.



The semicolon can be used to separate two main clauses joined by transitional phrases (*on the other hand, as a result, for example*) or by conjunctive adverbs (*however, hence, thus, therefore*):

Ex. The Congress voted in favor of the Highway Safety Act; however, the President vetoed the new bill.

Again, a comma **cannot** be used in place of the semicolon:

Ex. The Congress voted in favor of the Highway Safety Act, however the President vetoed the new bill.



Joining words like “however” can be used after commas, but only when they appear between nouns and their verbs:

Ex. The Congress voted in favor of the Highway Safety Act. The President, however, vetoed the new bill.

Note: Also be sure that you do not write **sentence fragments** after semicolons. This problem is especially common with the transitional phrase “for example”:

Ex. The electric car prototype has many features; for example, good handling and acceleration.



To correct this problem, you must include a subject and verb before “good handling and acceleration”:

Ex. The electric car prototype has many features; for example, it has good handling and acceleration.

The semicolon’s best use is when separating a series of items on a list, and at least one of the items on that list contains a comma:

Ex. The following crewmembers were on the bridge: James T. Kirk, captain of the Enterprise; Mr. Spock, science officer; Mr. Sulu, helmsman; Ms. Uhura, communications officer; and Dr. McCoy, chief medical officer.

Note: Each person on this list is identified by name and then job title, but there are five people in total, rather than ten.

When NOT to Use the Semicolon:

Paying special attention to the heading of this section and the beginning of the sentence in the previous example, notice that you should NOT use a semicolon to reveal information. This is the job of the colon (:).

Ex. I am dedicated to one goal; curing cancer.



Correct Ex. I am dedicated to one goal: curing cancer.

Practice Exercise

- 1) When the professor came down the hall, the students hid in the stairwell they didn’t want to be seen.
- 2) The celebration was cancelled however it was re-scheduled for the following week.
- 3) The meal consisted of the following: a garden salad with Italian dressing, a baked potato with sour cream and chives, New York striploin steak, cooked to perfection, steamed carrots, broccoli, and cauliflower, and blueberry cheesecake for dessert.
- 4) Sid and Nancy just bought a new car consequently Nancy looked for a new job.

Answers

- 1) When the professor came down the hall, the students hid in the stairwell; they didn’t want to be seen.
- 2) The celebration was cancelled; however it was re-scheduled for the following week.
- 3) The meal consisted of the following: a garden salad with Italian dressing; a baked potato with sour cream and chives; New York striploin steak, cooked to perfection; steamed carrots, broccoli, and cauliflower; and blueberry cheesecake for dessert.
- 4) Sid and Nancy just bought a new car; consequently Nancy looked for a new job.