

Semicolons

Use punctuation marks to separate closely-related independent clauses

Purpose

Semicolons @ Writing Commons

- provides definition and explanation of semicolon usage

What is a semicolon?

A semicolon is a punctuation mark used to separate closely-related independent clauses. Stronger than a comma, a semicolon does not require the use of a coordinating conjunction.

The semicolon offers a "higher" form of punctuation than the comma or dash. Unlike commas or dashes, the semicolon can correctly be used to separate sentences. If readers tend to pause for a half-second when they come to a comma, they pause for three-quarters of a second when they reach a semicolon.

How should semicolons be used?

1. Use a semicolon to link two closely-related independent clauses. You can show that ideas are closely related by using a semicolon rather than a period between them.
 - The secretary's fingers burned across the typewriter; the financial statements would be picked up by the client in one hour.
 - The question, though, is not economics; it is professional objectivity.
 - Breast cancer used to be the biggest killer for women; now it's lung cancer.
 - Homelessness is a problem that has evaded resolution; despite the heroic efforts of many concerned citizens, there are still thousands left on the streets.
2. Use semicolons to separate items in a list that contain other punctuation. When elements in a series require internal commas to ensure clarity, then semicolons must be used to separate those elements:
 - A perfect vacation would be long, relaxing, and cheap; include personable, sweet, flexible people; and make everything else seem trivial.
 - The delegates were from Sacramento, California; Jacksonville, Florida; Providence, Rhode Island; and Ann Arbor, Michigan.
 - A good proofreader must have good grammar, punctuation, and spelling skills; must like to read; and must have patience.
 - Concerned citizens can protect the environment by driving a fuel efficient car, such as a hybrid; recycling glass, plastic, and paper; and buying products with less packaging material.
3. Use a semicolon to link two independent clauses that have a transitional expression between them.
 - Sending a text message can cause a driver to take his eyes off the road; therefore, he may choose to put his cell phone in the trunk.

Avoid misuse of semicolons

- A semicolon should not be used to introduce a list (of three items or more); use a colon instead.

- Do not use a semicolon to separate a dependent clause from an independent clause; use a comma instead.
- Do not follow a semicolon with a coordinating conjunction; use a comma instead.

Note, however, that you are wise to avoid using unnecessary semicolons. Experienced writers and readers would prefer the second sentence because it avoids self-conscious punctuation.

- He was dressed in white pants; a white, Mexican wedding shirt; and sandals.
- He was dressed in a white, Mexican wedding shirt, white pants, and sandals.