



WRITER'S STUDIO RESOURCES: SEMICOLONS



What is a semicolon?

A semicolon is a punctuation mark that helps you connect two independent clauses (or complete sentences) that have closely related ideas. Semicolons can also be used to separate parts of sentences.

Why would I use a semicolon?

Semicolons create more separation between thoughts than a comma does but less than a period does. When used properly, it also makes your writing sound more sophisticated.



Semicolon Rules and Examples

Rule: Semicolons with two independent clauses

Use a semicolon between closely related independent clauses that are not joined by a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). For more on coordinating conjunctions, see our handout on commas.

Ex. We planned to go to the game,
but tickets were sold out.

Ex. We planned to go to the game;
the tickets were sold out.

Both of these examples are grammatically correct, but:

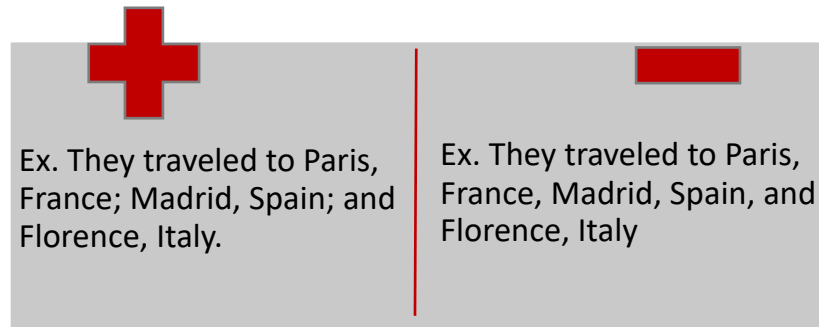
The example on the left is using the coordinating conjunction to join two independent clauses. By using a coordinating conjunction, it shows there is a specific logical relationship between the two clauses. The relationship will be implied by the coordinating conjunction in the sentence. In this example, *but* is showing a contrasting relationship.

The example on the right uses the semicolon to join the two independent clauses together since the ideas are closely related. By using the semicolon, it emphasizes the relationship between the two independent clauses without adding extra words and without explicitly noting the contrast. It also adds style to your writing.

Often times, there is more than one correct way to write a sentence using different punctuation and changing the sentence structure. The way a writer chooses to join a sentence or group of sentences is their own writing style, but keep in mind that semicolons should be used sparingly or else they overpower the writing.

Rule: Semicolons with two or more items in a series or list

Use a semicolon between items in a series containing other punctuation within the sentence. In other words, if you have a series, major groupings, or a list with other commas in the sentence, then instead of using a comma to separate each item in the series, use a semicolon.



By using semicolons in the example to the left, it provides the reader with greater clarity than by using commas like in the example to the right. If using commas in a series or list, sentences lack the illustration to tell how many items are in a list, or which words should be grouped together.

Rule: Semicolons with two independent clauses connected by conjunctive adverbs

Use a semicolon along with a conjunctive adverb and a comma to clarify the relationship between two closely related complete sentences. Conjunctive adverbs are connecting words like *however, hence, also, consequently, meanwhile, nevertheless, moreover, and furthermore* to name a few.

Ex. The little girl really wanted a puppy; however, her parents said no.

The conjunctive adverb creates a smooth transition between the two related ideas and is grammatically **correct**. It also shows a relationship between one idea and the next and helps improve the understanding of the text.

Ex. The student failed to follow the directions, consequently, he did poorly on the exam.

This example is grammatically **incorrect**; this is a mistake often made by writers and is easily corrected by replacing the first comma with a semicolon.

Note! There are cases where commas do come before a conjunctive adverb because the sentence is not a compound sentence. A compound sentence is a sentence with more than one subject or predicate. Commas should be used when the conjunctive adverb introduces, interrupts, or concludes a single independent clause.