

Semicolons

The semicolon may be the most misunderstood punctuation mark of all. It is often confused with other punctuation marks, particularly the colon and the comma. In actuality, however, the semicolon has only two uses: to join complete sentences and as a “super-comma.”

To Connect Sentences:

A semicolon can be used to join two or more complete sentences (independent clauses).

Example: Fred is a good typist; he makes few mistakes.

In this sentence, the semicolon is used instead of a period. The example could be written as two sentences (separated by a period), but connecting them with a semicolon highlights their close relationship with each other. With two separate sentences, the reader must make a full stop. With two sentences connected by a semicolon, the reader does not come to a full stop, making the relationship between the sentences closer.

Note: You might remember that you can also use a **comma + coordinating conjunction** (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) to join complete sentences together. For the purposes of student writing, *do not* confuse the semicolon with a comma in this instance.

Incorrect: Fred is a good typist; and he makes few mistakes.

Correct: Fred is a good typist, and he makes few mistakes.

Use a semicolon with transition words:

When you use a semicolon alone to link complete sentences, you ask readers to recognize the logical link between the sentences. But you can *specify* the relationship between sentences by adding transitional expressions such as *for example*, *therefore*, *in contrast*, *on the other hand*, etc. after the semicolon. When one of these transitional expressions is used, follow the transition word with a comma.

Example: Fred is a good typist; *therefore*, he makes few mistakes.

The word “therefore” illustrates more precisely the causal relationship by showing that since Fred is a good typist, he makes few mistakes.

Be careful! *To use a semicolon to connect sentences, the group of words on either side of the semicolon must be a complete sentence. That is, they both must have a subject, a verb, and be able to stand alone as a complete thought.*

Note: Using a semicolon to connect sentences is *never* mandatory. It is an optional device that a writer uses to show relationships between ideas. If you are not sure if you have used a semicolon correctly, it is probably safer to omit it.

Super- Comma:

As you know, commas normally separate items in a list.

Example: Attending the meeting were Travis Claypool, Richard Hernandez, and Sandra Lee.

Sometimes, however, items in the list may have commas within them, as in this next example.

Example: Attending the meeting were Travis Claypool, the mayor, Richard Hernandez, the city engineer, and Sandra Lee, the architect.

In this case, the reader may have trouble deciding which commas separate parts of the series and which belong within items. For instance, in the example on the previous page, it is difficult to tell whether “the mayor” clarifies who Travis Claypool *is* or whether both Travis Claypool *and* the mayor attended the meeting. To avoid confusion, semicolons can be used as “supercommas” to separate elements in a series when one or more contain commas.

Example: Attending the meeting were Travis Claypool, the mayor; Richard Hernandez, the city engineer; and Sandra Lee, the architect.

Do the following exercise to practice what you've learned

Exercise:

INSERT EITHER A SEMICOLON OR A COMMA WHERE NECESSARY IN EACH OF THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES. REMEMBER THAT A SEMICOLON AND A COORDINATING CONJUNCTION ARE NOT USED TOGETHER. ALSO REMEMBER THAT, WHEN A SEMICOLON + TRANSITIONAL EXPRESSION ARE USED, A COMMA SHOULD FOLLOW THE TRANSITIONAL WORD.

1. The girl who rooms across the hall has never taken a college course in algebra however she plans to take one next semester.
2. James was called to the office this morning and did not return until after lunch consequently I had several hours for uninterrupted study.
3. Gina isn't conceited she is just shy.
4. Greg wasn't interested in my problems he had his own.
5. An accident had blocked traffic and we missed our flight.
6. The ball tottered on the rim for an endless instant and then it dropped through the net for the winning two points.
7. No flash photography was allowed in the theater therefore Mona left her camera in the car.
8. The restaurant was crowded we had to wait an hour for a table.
9. Oregano is my favorite spice I use it in all my recipes.
10. Michael is a good public speaker on the other hand his voice is quite annoying.