

Semicolons

I have grown fond of semicolons in recent years. . . . It is almost always a greater pleasure to come across a semicolon than a period. The period tells you that that is that; if you didn't get all the meaning you wanted or expected, anyway you got all the writer intended to parcel out and now you have to move along. But with a semicolon there you get a pleasant little feeling of expectancy; there is more to come; read on; it will get clearer.

– Lewis Thomas

Use a **semicolon** [;]

- to help sort out a monster list:
 - There were citizens from Bangor, Maine; Hartford, Connecticut; Boston, Massachusetts; and Newport, Rhode Island.
- **OR**
 - We had four professors on our committee: Peter Wursthorn, Professor of Mathematics; Ronald Pepin, Professor of English; Cynthia Greenblatt, Professor of Education; and Nada Light, Professor of Nursing.
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- to separate closely related independent clauses:
 - My grandmother seldom goes to bed this early; she's afraid she'll miss out on something.

The semicolon allows the writer to imply a relationship between nicely balanced ideas without actually stating that relationship. (Instead of saying *because* my grandmother is afraid she'll miss out on something, we have implied the *because*. Thus the reader is involved in the development of an idea—a clever, subliminal way of engaging the reader's attention.)

The semicolon (;) is probably the most commonly misused punctuation mark. It is easy to use, but many people do not understand how to use it correctly.

Semicolons are easy to use correctly, as long as you remember one simple rule about semicolon use: a semicolon should be used to separate two independent clauses (or complete sentences) that are closely related in meaning.

That's it--that's all that you need to remember to use semicolons correctly. Wow. That was easy.

To help you determine if you are using a semicolon correctly, just ask yourself if a period would be correct if used where the semicolon is used. If so, then you have used the semicolon correctly. If a comma could be used where a semicolon is used, then the semicolon is not used correctly. To some extent, periods and semicolons are interchangeable--in many situations, you can use one or the other. But semicolons and commas are not interchangeable--if you can replace a semicolon with a comma, you have used the semicolon incorrectly.

Semicolons are often misused. Some writers seem to think that semicolons are fancy commas that create longer pauses than commas. This is not true. A semicolon NEVER should be used to try to create a "pause" longer than that achieved by a comma.

If you can use a period correctly, then you can use a semicolon correctly. A semicolon is used just like a period, but it is used to separate two complete sentences when the sentences are closely related in meaning.

(Note: There are some exceptions to these rules of semicolon usage, but they are so rare that they seldom come up in student papers. There are actually four rules for semicolons).

Examples

1. **Incorrect:** I had a great weekend; visiting with friends, playing golf, and eating at a nice restaurant.
2. **Correct:** I had a great weekend; I visited with friends, played golf, and ate at a nice restaurant.
3. **Incorrect:** Next weekend, I plan to go hiking; which is one of my favorite activities.
4. **Correct:** Next weekend, I plan to go hiking; hiking is one of my favorite activities.
5. **Incorrect:** It might rain next weekend, though; so I might have to stay inside.
6. **Correct:** It might rain next weekend, though, so I might have to stay inside.
7. **Correct:** It might rain next weekend, though; I might have to stay inside.
8. **Incorrect:** I like to spend time outdoors; and I can't stand to stay inside.
9. **Correct:** I like to spend time outdoors; I can't stand to stay inside.