



## Semicolons

A semicolon is a punctuation mark used chiefly in a coordinating function between major sentence elements.

What does a semicolon look like? ;

A semicolon is used in two types of situations:

- when separating independent clauses, under certain specific conditions, or
- when separating items in a list, at least one of which contains commas

### Semicolons Separating Independent Clauses

#### Identifying Independent Clauses

A necessary skill to have when deciding whether to use a semicolon rather than a comma is the ability to identify an independent clause. An independent clause is *independent* because it can stand alone, *by itself*, as a complete sentence.

In the examples shown below, each underlined portion is an independent clause. When you read them, notice that each one can be a complete sentence on its own.

#### Directly linking 2 independent clauses

When two independent clauses relate to each other, they can be combined into one sentence without any additional words; however, they must be linked by a semicolon.

*Ex: Writing is an enjoyable pastime; many people write for pleasure.*

#### Linking 2 independent clauses which are connected by a conjunctive adverb or other transitional expression

This is similar to directly linking two independent clauses because the portion on either side of the semicolon can stand by itself as a complete sentence, with no changes. The difference is the presence of a conjunctive adverb (however, therefore, meanwhile, etc.) or other transitional expression (as a result, because of this, etc.) beginning the second independent clause.

*Ex: I enjoy writing poems; however, my best friend prefers to write stories.*

#### Linking 2 independent clauses (one of which contains commas) connected by a coordinating conjunction\*

\*This is a case in which you can choose to use a semicolon *or* a comma.

When at least one of two independent clauses which is connected by a coordinating conjunction (and, but) contains a comma, a semicolon can be used before the conjunction instead of a comma.

*Ex: Writing is often a fulfilling activity; but if a person finds it difficult, boring, or purposeless, he or she might not enjoy it.*

Ex: Michelle enjoys writing short stories, essays, and articles for her school newspaper; but her favorite activity is writing poetry.

Ex: In order to communicate effectively in the business world today, one must develop good writing skills; and developing good writing skills takes time, effort, and practice.

## Semicolons Used in Lists

Separating items in a list when one or more of the items contains commas in itself

Sometimes when listing a group of items, one or more of the items in that series will contain a comma or another list within it. When this occurs, you can choose to use a semicolon to separate each of the main items (in this example, the main items are your surroundings, the lighting, and what you have), while using a comma when necessary within each individual item (for example, “clean, organized, and quiet”).

*Ex: When sitting down to write, it is helpful to make sure that your surroundings are clean, organized, and quiet; that the lighting is sufficiently bright; and that you have a sharp pencil, an eraser, and plenty of paper.*

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