

How to Use Semicolons

Introduction

The semicolon is possibly the most misunderstood and misused punctuation mark in English grammar. It's useful to know that unlike a comma or a full stop, it is not necessary to use a semicolon; you could choose to avoid them. However, used correctly, the semicolon can bring both clarity and nuance to your writing.

There are two essential ways to use a semicolon. The first is relatively straightforward and separates a list of items in a sentence; the second separates independent clauses, while connecting them as related ideas.

1. Listing items

Semicolons can be used to link items in a list, such as objects, locations, names and descriptions. Where the list items already contain commas, a semicolon helps avoid confusion between the items; in this way the semicolon acts like a 'super comma'.

For example –

Michaela was keen to travel to as many European countries and their cities as possible and her itinerary included France, Paris; Austria, Vienna; Italy, Rome; and Germany, Berlin.

A colon can be used to introduce a list that separates items with semicolons.

For example –

There was a mess on her desk that needed to be sorted: stacks of books were piled on each side, both precarious in height and close to toppling; pens were scattered around, some with lids, others with none; apple cores, half-finished bowls of nuts and chocolate wrappers were left under papers, on top of books and stuffed into drawers; cold cups of coffee were stacked to one side.

Another example –

According to T.H. Marshall's classic typology, citizenship rights are divided into three 'generations': civil rights, such as freedom of speech; political rights, such as the right to vote; and social rights, such as the right to work. (Matilda Handsley-Davis)

2. Linking two independent clauses that are closely related, to indicate their connection.

To use a semicolon correctly in this way, it is important to understand what constitutes an independent clause, also known as a grammatically simple sentence.

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What is an independent clause?

An independent clause contains two elements: a noun, (or subject), and a verb, (or predicate).

'I am.' This is an example of the simplest independent clause. 'I' is the noun; 'am' is the verb.

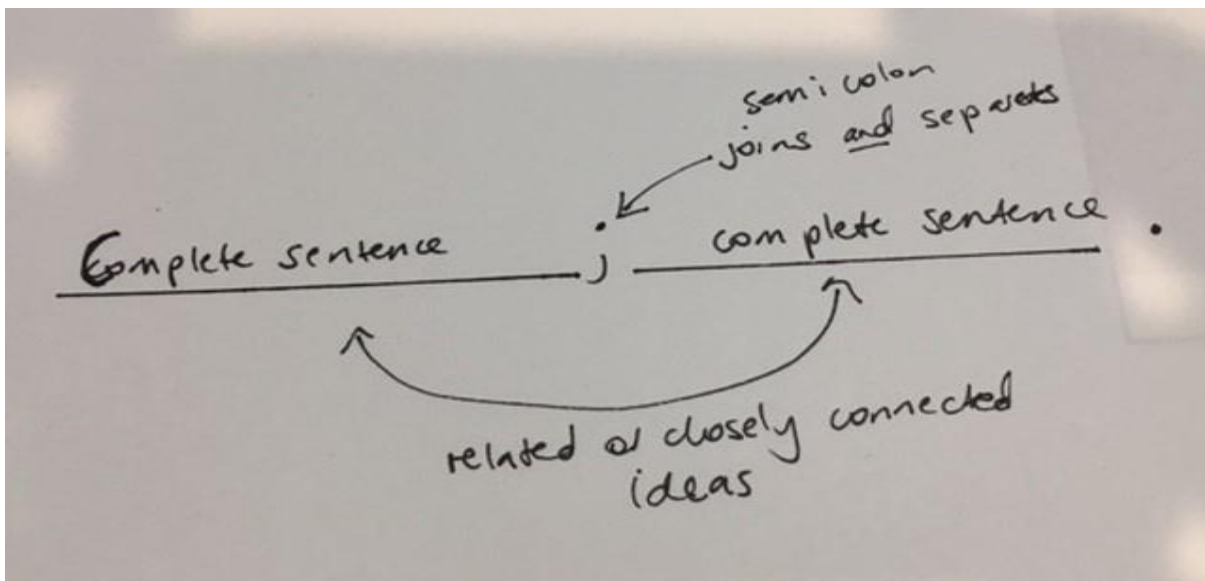
'I am hungry.' This is also an independent clause, with the addition of an adjective.

Here is another independent clause, which contains more than one noun: 'A bowl of laksa sits on the table in front of me.'

These two independent clause examples mentioned above are clearly related. Using a semicolon, instead of a full stop, to divide (and connect) them, subtly adds further meaning (such as intensifying the hunger and future action of the narrator).

I am hungry; a bowl of laksa sits on the table in front of me.

A semicolon is one way to correctly join two independent clauses and make them into one sentence. Semicolons can be effective when used to join longer sentences, particularly when building an argument. They can also be used to successively join and build ideas.



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Here is an example –

Therefore, it is inaccurate to characterise the socialist realist art of the 1930s as simply the product of uniformly oppressive Stalinist policy; socialist realism was also driven from below by some artists and by the public. (Matilda Handsley-Davis)

A coordinating conjunction might be placed after the semicolon for contrast or emphasis. (Coordinating conjunctions can be remembered by the acronym FANBOYS: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.*)

For example –

In this narrative analysis, I chose research participants whose work aligned with the theories previously described; yet these participants didn't always express views that aligned with those theories during our interviews.

A conjunction adverb (such as *however* or *consequently* or *significantly*) might also be placed after the semicolon.

For example –

Many of these were unique sequences of known human oral bacteria; however, several taxa had not previously been identified in human oral microbiota (Table 6). (Matilda Handsley-Davis)

Finally, a transitional phrase (such as *for example*, or *as a result*) can be used after the semicolon to connect the two related ideas.

For example –

Sedentary hours could also reflect socioeconomic factors; for example, the type of job an individual has is typically linked to sedentary hours. (Matilda Handsley-Davis)

The main thing to remember is that independent clauses need to be held apart in some way. This can be done with punctuation, including a full stop, colon, dash, or a semicolon. Independent clauses **cannot** be held apart by a comma; this is known as a comma splice.

Comma Splices

I am hungry, a bowl of laksa sits on the table in front of me.

Joining two independent clauses with a comma creates what is often referred to as a comma splice. A comma splice is a grammatically incorrect sentence. Comma splices might be used in creative writing to create 'effect', but they are best avoided as they

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very easily lead to a lack of clarity. They should not be used in formal, professional or academic writing.

Run On Sentences

I am hungry a bowl of laksa sits on the table in front of me.

Run on sentences occur when two independent clauses are joined without any punctuation. A run on sentence is also grammatically incorrect and is confusing and difficult to understand.

The semicolon both separates two independent clauses, and links them at the same time.

Why use a semicolon to join two independent clauses?

There are a number of reasons you might choose to use a semicolon to bring precision, subtlety and nuance to your writing.

A semicolon can:

- Help organise longer sequences of sentences in an ordered way
- Provide a means for advancing an argument, particularly to demonstrate causal relationship between two ideas or things
- Demonstrate a close relationship between two ideas without using more words to explain that relationship
- Show how the second independent clause might explain the first independent clause
- Emphasise or contrast the second independent clause; this can be achieved with the use of a conjunction, such as *and* or *but* after the semicolon.

What does a semicolon 'sound' like?

Punctuation shows a reader how to 'hear' your writing, when to pause and for how long. A semicolon is tougher than a comma and gentler than a full stop, and its 'sound' sits right in the middle of the two. A comma indicates a small pause and upward inflection of the voice, while a full stop indicates a longer pause and drop in modulation. A semicolon indicates a pause that is almost as long as a full stop, but there is an upward inflection in the voice, similar to that of a comma. This is helpful to know when reading aloud, which is the most effective way to rewrite and edit. Training yourself to 'read' punctuation aloud forces you to hear what is on the page, rather than what you *think* is on the page.

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Because the semi-colon can bring nuance to writing, they also ask a little more of readers. The semicolon says: these two ideas are connected; and sometimes there is a subtlety in that connection that requires the reader to read closely for that connection. They can also create long sentences, which can be tiring for the reader. For these reasons, it is advisable to use semicolons sparingly.

References

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