A Practical Approach to Understanding the Semicolon

“Semicolon. n. the punctuation mark (;) used to indicate a major division in a sentence where a more distinct separation is felt between clauses or items of a list than is indicated by a comma.”

The Random House College Dictionary

Two Main Uses of the Semicolon: To Connect and to Separate

Summary

Two Main Uses of the Semicolon

1. **Semicolons connect two complete and completely related sentences:**
   - When you do not have a complete sentence (containing both a noun/subject and a verb/predicate) on each side of a semicolon, then you cannot use a semicolon. Another way of looking at this is to remember that any place you can put a period, you can put a semicolon. *But…*
   - A semicolon is chosen over a period *only* when the sentences are related in thought.
   - When you use a semicolon to join two related sentences, *no* connecting words are used (i.e., coordinating conjunctions or FANBOYS: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so).
   - Instead of a semicolon, you may choose to use a comma—along with a coordinating conjunction—to join two related sentences.

Examples of a semicolon used to join two related sentences:
I am going home; I intend to stay there.

It rained during the afternoon; we managed to have our picnic anyway.

NOTE: Long connecting words, or conjunctive adverbs (however, moreover, therefore, consequently, otherwise, nevertheless, thus), can be used after a semicolon to place emphasis on the clause following the semicolon. When used in this manner, these connecting words are followed by a comma.

Examples:
I am going home; moreover, I intend to stay there.

It rained during the afternoon; however, we managed to have our picnic anyway.

2. To separate elements in a series:
   • A comma is ordinarily placed after every item in a series.

Example:
The song seemed simultaneously sardonic, satirical, and sweet.

But... a semicolon is used in place of the comma in certain instances for clarity, particularly if the sentence is long and complex.

Example:
For our party, we ordered food from Las Margaritas, a restaurant that serves Mexican food; Johnny’s Wok, which serves Chinese food; and Café Fresco, a gourmet restaurant that offers Northwest cuisine with some vegetarian items.

Summary
[ . ] A period is used to show independence of sentences.

[ ; ] A semicolon is used to show sentences are related in thought.

[ , ] A comma may also be used—along with a coordinating conjunction—to show sentences are related in thought.

Sources: