

# Writing and Communication Center

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## 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:

Some examples adopted from the Purdue University Online Writing Lab, 1994.  
*The Random House College Dictionary*. Rev. ed. 1979.

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