

Using semicolons

The semicolon is used to connect major sentence elements of equal grammatical rank.

Use a semicolon between closely related independent clauses not joined with a coordinating conjunction.

When related independent clauses appear in one sentence, they are ordinarily linked with a comma and a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet*). The coordinating conjunction signals the relation between the clauses. If the clauses are closely related and the relation is clear without a conjunction, they may be linked with a semicolon instead.

Injustice is relatively easy to bear; what stings is justice.
— H. L. Mencken

When I was a boy, I was told that anybody could become president; I'm beginning to believe it. — Clarence Darrow

A semicolon must be used whenever a coordinating conjunction has been omitted between independent clauses. To use merely a comma creates a kind of run-on sentence known as a *comma splice*.

- ▶ In 1800, a traveler needed six weeks to get from New York City to Chicago; in 1860, the trip by railroad took only two days.

Do not overuse the semicolon as a means of revising run-on sentences.

Use a semicolon between independent clauses linked with a transitional expression.

Transitional expressions include conjunctive adverbs and transitional phrases.

CONJUNCTIVE ADVERBS

accordingly	anyway	certainly	conversely
also	besides	consequently	finally
furthermore	likewise	now	then
hence	meanwhile	otherwise	therefore
however	moreover	similarly	thus
incidentally	nevertheless	specifically	
indeed	next	still	
instead	nonetheless	subsequently	

TRANSITIONAL PHRASES

after all	even so	in fact
as a matter of fact	for example	in other words
as a result	for instance	in the first place
at any rate	in addition	on the contrary
at the same time	in conclusion	on the other hand

When a transitional expression appears between independent clauses, it is preceded by a semicolon and usually followed by a comma.

- ▶ Many corals grow very gradually; in fact, the creation of a coral reef can take centuries.

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When a transitional expression appears in the middle or at the end of the second independent clause, the semicolon goes *between the clauses*.

- ▶ Most singers gain fame through hard work and dedication;
Evita, however, found other means.

Transitional expressions should not be confused with the coordinating conjunctions *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *for*, *so*, and *yet*, which are preceded by a comma when they link independent clauses.

Use a semicolon between items in a series containing internal punctuation.

- ▶ Classic science fiction sagas are *Star Trek*, with Mr. Spock,
Battlestar Galactica, with Cylon Raiders, and *Star Wars*,
with Han Solo, Luke Skywalker, and Darth Vader.

Without the semicolons, the reader would have to sort out the major groupings, distinguishing between important and less important pauses according to the logic of the sentence. By inserting semicolons at the major breaks, the writer does this work for the reader.

Avoid common misuses of the semicolon.

Do not use a semicolon in the following situations.

BETWEEN A SUBORDINATE CLAUSE AND THE REST OF THE SENTENCE

- ▶ Unless you brush your teeth within ten or fifteen minutes after eating, brushing does almost no good.

BETWEEN AN APPOSITIVE AND THE WORD IT REFERS TO

- ▶ The scientists were fascinated by the species *Argyroneta aquatica*, a spider that lives underwater.

TO INTRODUCE A LIST

- ▶ Some of my favorite film stars have home pages on the Web:
Uma Thurman, Billy Bob Thornton, and Halle Berry.

BETWEEN INDEPENDENT CLAUSES JOINED BY AND, BUT, OR, NOR, FOR, SO, OR YET

- ▶ Five of the applicants had worked with spreadsheets, but only one was familiar with database management.

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EXCEPTIONS: If at least one of the independent clauses contains internal punctuation, you may use a semicolon even though the clauses are joined with a coordinating conjunction.

As a vehicle [the model T] was hard-working, commonplace,
and heroic; and it often seemed to transmit those qualities to
the person who rode in it. — E. B. White

Although a comma would also be correct in this sentence, the semicolon is more effective, for it indicates the relative weights of the pauses.

Occasionally, a semicolon may be used to emphasize a sharp contrast or a firm distinction between clauses joined with a coordinating conjunction.

We hate some persons because we do not know them; and we
will not know them because we hate them.
— Charles Caleb Colton