# The Semicolon

*"Sometimes you get a glimpse of a semicolon coming, a few lines farther on, and it's like climbing a steep path through words and seeing a wooden bench just at a bend in the road ahead, a place we can expect to sit for a moment, catching your breath."*

*Lewis Thomas*

Between the common and the period you’ll find the semicolon. Pausing more strongly than the comma, yet dividing more weakly than the period, it is a mediator. According to Eric Partridge, "By its very form (;) [the semicolon] betrays its dual nature: it is both period and comma." It is best thought of as a bridge between two worlds.

To connect two closely related sentences. Sometimes two (or more) sentences are so closely related that you won't want the separation of a period, yet they are also so independent that they need stronger separation than a comma can offer.

Ex: He ran with his shirt over his head. He had forgotten his umbrella once again. These two thoughts are so closely linked that they don't feel quite right standing on their own. A comma won't do, because they're each complete sentences:

He ran with his shirt over his head, he had forgotten his umbrella once again.

**He ran with his shirt over his head; he had forgotten his umbrella once again.**

The wind knocked over two trees on my block alone. The cleanup would be atrocious.

**The wind knocked over two trees on my block alone; the cleanup would be atrocious.**

Stylistically, in a paragraph plagued by short sentences, a semicolon can smooth out the choppiness:

She wasn't going to support him anymore. It was time for him to get a job. He'd never leave the house otherwise. He'd loaf forever if he could. He was born that way. It was thanks to his father. It had taken her 20 years to get rid of him. She wouldn't go through that again. The son had two years. After that, the locks were changed.

All these short sentences give this paragraph a staccato, childlike feel. If we had a semicolon or two, though, the problem is solved:

**She wasn't going to support him anymore. It was time for him to get a job. He'd never leave the house otherwise; he'd loaf forever if he could. He was born that way. It was thanks to his father. It had taken her 20 years to get rid of him. She wouldn't go through that again. The son had two years; after that, the locks were changed.**

The semicolon can enhance word economy, because its appearance often allows surrounding words to be cut. For example:

She couldn't dance in her favorite hall because it was under construction.

**She couldn't dance in her favorite hall; it was under construction.**

Decide whether these sentences need a semicolon, a period, a comma, or nothing.

1. My favorite baseball team has played games in New York, New York Tampa Bay, Florida and Oakland, California.
2. At lunchtime, I like to eat a peanut butter and banana sandwich so that’s what I usually make.
3. I like to hike and fish.
4. I am an excellent soccer goalie my sister is good at math.
5. My sister hates hot weather on the other hand she hates cold weather as well.
6. The world is a very big place I hope to see most of it someday.

Key

1. My favorite baseball team has played games in New York, New York; Tampa Bay, Florida; and Oakland, California.
2. At lunchtime, I like to eat a peanut butter and banana sandwich; so that’s what I usually make.
3. I like to hike and fish.
4. I am an excellent soccer goalie. My sister is good at math.
5. My sister hates hot weather; on the other hand, she hates cold weather too.
6. The world is a very big place; I hope to see most of it someday.

# The Colon

*The colon is the magician of the punctuation world. It holds its audience in suspense, waits until just the right moment, then voilà: it pulls back the curtain to reveal the results. It sits on the very peak of drama, with all that comes before building to it, and all that follows a denouement (i.e, outcome).*

Noah Lukeman *The Art and Mastery of Punctuation*

The colon can be used to pause. Periods and semicolons provide a pause *between* thoughts, commas provide a pause *between* clauses, but no other punctuation mark provides a substantial pause *within* the same thought.

The colon can be used to enhance word economy, creating tighter, more concise work.

I've been meaning to tell you something, and that is that I'm pregnant.

**I've been meaning to tell you something: I'm pregnant.**

The colon can be used to summarize. If you're describing attributes of a character, or the elements of the house, or the methodology of a prison. Consider:

**The parlor was immense, the kitchen spectacular, the two billiard rooms offered a water view and the six fireplaces were always lit: it was a palace.**

The impression that this place was a "palace" is the direct conclusion of all that came before.

The colon can be used to introduce a list. Observe how master writer, and San Jose State graduate, Amy Tan utilizes a colon to dramatic effect:

**America was where all my mother’s hopes lay. She had come here in 1949 after losing everything in China: her mother and father, her family home, her first husband, and two daughters, twin baby girls.**

**Exercises**

**Change these sentences to incorporate colons properly.**

**1. Send application materials to: 1648 Mariposa St, New York, NY 10003.**

**2. To Whom It May Concern,**

**3. The presenters at the 2012 symposium include: an architect, an entrepreneur, and a bio-medical engineer.**

**4. The factors contributing to childhood obesity include: diet, exercise habits, and genetic background.**

**5. Sally could not speak. She was stunned.**

**Exercise Answer Key**

**(Answers may vary slightly.)**

1. Send application materials to this address: 1648 Mariposa St, New York, NY 10003.

2. To Whom It May Concern:

**3. The 2012 symposium will include a variety of successful presenters: an architect, an entrepreneur, and a bio-medical engineer.**

**4. There are three main factors contributing to childhood obesity: diet, exercise habits, and genetic background.**

**5. Sally could not speak: she was stunned.**