

Semicolons

A semicolon is a useful mark of punctuation that can strengthen the logical connection between related ideas. Writers often use semicolons in an essay when trying to join ideas without signaling a complete stop with a period. However, semicolons function in specific ways, and writers are often confused about when a semicolon is performing correctly or incorrectly. This handout can help you understand correct semicolon usage, recognize incorrect semicolon usage, and appreciate how semicolons function to organize ideas in your reader's mind.

Using a Semicolon to Join Two Independent Clauses

The primary function of a semicolon is to join two independent clauses into one “period” of thought.

Example: I love collecting vinyl records; the large artwork, the colorful wax, and the warm sound of records make it a fun hobby.

Keep in mind, however, that semicolons signal to readers that two independent clauses are related. In the example above, the two independent clauses are related logically. The first clause makes a statement, and the second clause expands on that statement. The use of the semicolon binds together in the reader's mind the statement and the expansion of the statement. You want to avoid using semicolons to connect ideas that are not directly related.

Not logical: I am going to get lunch with a friend tomorrow; yesterday, I had pizza for dinner.

These two clauses are not related and do not warrant a semicolon. They encapsulate two different ideas, so a period should follow the first independent clause.

Logical: I am going to eat burgers with Sarah later tonight; yesterday, I had pizza for dinner with Sam.

The semicolon is effective here because it draws attention to how much junk food the writer has been eating over the past few days.

Using a Semicolon with a Conjunctive Adverb

You have probably seen semicolons used with conjunctive adverbs such as *therefore*, *however*, *moreover*, and *furthermore*. These words name the logical relationship between two ideas; we use them when the logical relationship is not evident. The semicolon is used because these words are adverbs, not conjunctions; thus, the clauses remain independent.

Example: I don't really enjoy ice cream; however, I love chocolate milkshakes.

In the example provided above, the use of the semicolon and *however* signals the strong logical relationship between the two independent clauses: the first clause makes a statement, and the second clause provides a sharp contrast to that initial statement.

You should make sure the conjunctive adverb you use accurately names the logical relationship between the two clauses. Writers can get into trouble when they connect two ideas by using an illogical connector:

Not logical: I had to do an incredible amount of homework last night; nonetheless, I could not go to Ben's party.

In this sentence, *nonetheless* does not logically connect the two independent clauses because *nonetheless* should be used to show a contradiction, not a cause-and-effect relationship. The sentence can be improved through the use of a logical connector like *therefore*, which shows a result.

Logical: I had to do an incredible amount of homework last night; therefore, I could not go to Ben's party.

Using a Semicolon to Identify Items in a List with other Punctuation

Just as semicolons help readers distinguish ideas in a compound sentence, semicolons also distinguish items in a list that already contains other punctuation. Usually, commas separate items in lists, but when multiple items also carry marks of punctuation, lists of items can become hard to read.

Hard to distinguish: I'm going on a vacation with Samantha, my boss, Andrew, my coworker, Sarah, my cousin, and Alyssa, my best friend.

The punctuation in this list is confusing. Am I going on vacation with four people (Samantha, Andrew, Sarah, and Alyssa) or seven people (Samantha, my boss, Andrew, a coworker, Sarah, my cousin, and Alyssa)? A semicolon can help a writer create clarity within this list of items.

Clearly distinguished: I'm going on vacation with Samantha, my boss; Andrew, my coworker; Sarah, my cousin; and Alyssa, my best friend.

Avoiding Common Errors in Semicolon Usage

Now that we have gone over correct semicolon usage and why writers choose to use semicolons, it is important to highlight a few ways students consistently misuse semicolons.

Do not use a semicolon to introduce a list of items.

Sometimes, writers confuse semicolons with colons and think *semicolons* can introduce a list of items. Remember, *semicolons* usually join two independent clauses. Colons signify the start of a series of items.

Incorrect use of a semicolon: We learned about a number of different famous astronomers in class today, such as; Galileo Galilei, Nicolaus Copernicus, Isaac Newton, and Carl Sagan.

Revised: We learned about a number of different famous astronomers in class today, such as Galileo Galilei, Nicolaus Copernicus, Isaac Newton, and Carl Sagan.

Revised to use a colon: We learned about the following famous astronomers in class today: Galileo Galilei, Nicolaus Copernicus, Isaac Newton, and Carl Sagan.

Do not use a semicolon with a coordinating conjunction.

A comma comes before a coordinating conjunction to join two independent clauses—not a semicolon. It is redundant to include a semicolon *and* a coordinating conjunction.

Incorrect: I initially wanted to take five classes in order to graduate a semester early; but I would have had to quit my job, which I did not want to do.

Revised: I initially wanted to take five classes in order to graduate a semester early, but I would have had to quit my job, which I did not want to do.

Activity 1

Add, keep, or remove a semicolon when necessary.

1. I don't listen to much heavy metal. However, I enjoy every album from the band Slayer.
2. I have three dogs at home; my wife works for Apple.
3. Andrew saw *Guardians of the Galaxy* in theaters last night; I think I will hang out with him tonight.
4. I have to study for a huge midterm tomorrow; therefore, I can't go to John's party tonight.
5. Jacqueline still doesn't know how to ride a bike. She says she is afraid to fall down and embarrass herself.
6. The ice cream shop sold a whole bunch of unique flavors, such as; circus animal, maple bacon, and banana cream pie.
7. My favorite sport is hockey; but I play football for the team at my high school.
8. I normally don't enjoy fantasy stories, nevertheless, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* is my favorite movie.

Activity 2

Below is an excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail." It contains no punctuation, so read through the paragraph and add commas, semicolons, and periods when appropriate. You should work through the passage by identifying clauses to figure out where individual sentences are. Remember, there is not always just one clause per sentence, and semicolons should join two independent clauses into one logical thought. Afterward, compare your punctuated passage with the one provided in the answer key.

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever the yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself and that is what has happened to the American Negro something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom and something without has reminded him that it can be gained consciously or unconsciously he has been caught up by the Zeitgeist and with his black brothers of Africa and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia South America and the Caribbean, the United States Negro is moving with a sense of great urgency toward the promised land of racial justice if one recognizes this vital urge that has engulfed the Negro community one should readily understand why public demonstrations are taking place the Negro has many pent-up resentments and latent frustration and he must release them so let him march let him make prayer pilgrimages to the city hall let him go on freedom rides and try to understand why he must do so if his repressed emotions are not released in nonviolent way they will seek expression through violence this is not a threat but a fact of history so I have not said to my people "get rid of your discontent" rather I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled into the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action and now this approach is being termed extremist

Answer Key for Activity 1

1. I don't listen to much heavy metal; however, I enjoy every album from the band Slayer.
2. I have three dogs at home. My wife works for Apple.
3. Andrew saw *Guardians of the Galaxy* in theaters last night; I think I will hang out with him tonight. (Original sentence is correct.)
4. I have to study for a huge midterm tomorrow; therefore, I can't go to John's party tonight. (Original sentence is correct.)
5. Jacqueline still doesn't know how to ride a bike; she says she is afraid to fall down and embarrass herself.
6. The ice cream shop sold a whole bunch of unique flavors, such as circus animal, maple bacon, and banana cream pie.
7. My favorite sport is hockey, but I play football for the team at my high school.
8. I normally don't enjoy fantasy stories; nevertheless, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* is my favorite movie.

Answer Key for Activity 2

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is what has happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom, and something without has reminded him that it can be gained. Consciously or unconsciously, he has been caught up by the Zeitgeist, and with his black brothers of Africa and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America, and the Caribbean, the United States Negro is moving with a sense of great urgency toward the promised land of racial justice. If one recognizes this vital urge that has engulfed the Negro community, one should readily understand why public demonstrations are taking place. The Negro has many pent-up resentments and latent frustrations, and he must release them. So let him march; let him make prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; let him go on freedom rides—and try to understand why he must do so. If his repressed emotions are not released in nonviolent ways, they will seek expression through violence; this is not a threat but a fact of history. So I have not said to my people: "Get rid of your discontent." Rather, I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled into the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action, and now this approach is being termed extremist.

References

Lunsford, Andrea. *The Everyday Writer*. 5th Edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2013. Print.