

SEMI-COLONS

The semicolon (;) is a punctuation mark that separates major elements of sentences. It can be used to connect two closely related independent clauses, as long as they are not already joined by a coordinating conjunction

A helpful way to remember what the semicolon does is to think about its appearance, as it looks like a comma with a period above it. A semi-colon creates a more distinct pause, or separation, between thoughts than a comma does but less than a period does. Here are the two most common uses of the semi-colon:

- To help separate items in a list, when some of those items already contain commas. For example, let's say I want to list three items that I bought at the University Bookstore:
 - Notebooks
 - Pens
 - School T-shirts
- In a sentence, I would separate these items with commas:
 - I bought notebooks, pens, and school t-shirts.
- Now suppose that the three items I want to list are described in phrases that already contain some commas:
 - Large, purple composition notebooks
 - Blue, bold, ink jet pens
 - Cotton, short-sleeved school t-shirts
- If I use commas to separate these items, my sentence looks like this:
 - I bought large, purple composition notebooks, blue, bold, ink jet pens, and cotton, short-sleeved school t-shirts.
 - The middle of that sentence is a little confusing because it can be difficult to discern how many items are actually in the list, or difficult to tell which words should be grouped together. This is an instance where a semicolon can help makes things clearer.
- Here is where the semi-colon can help. Instead of using commas between items in this list, I can use semicolons, so readers will now easily be able to tell how many items are in this list and which words belong together:
 - I bought large, purple composition notebooks; blue, bold, ink jet pens; and cotton, short-sleeved school t-shirts.
- An independent clause is either a thought or group of words that can stand on its own (independently)—it is a complete sentence. Semi-colons can be used between two independent clauses. The semi-colon keeps the clauses somewhat separate, like a period would do, so we can easily tell which ideas belong to which clause. The semicolon can also suggest that there may be a close relationship between the two clauses—a closer relationship than would exist if they were merely separated by a period.

- Let's look at a few examples. Here are a few fine independent clauses, standing on their own as complete sentences:
 - I went to the University Bookstore today. I bought everything I needed for school. I found a composition notebook, pens, and school t-shirts.

- If we were to add semicolons to this sentence, it could be done several ways. The semicolons could combine two (but not all three) of the independent clauses. As a result, either of the following sentences would be acceptable:
 - I went to the University Bookstore today; I bought everything I needed for school. I found a composition notebook, pens, and school t-shirts.
 - OR**
 - I went to the University Bookstore today. I bought everything I needed for school; I found a composition notebook, pens, and school t-shirts.
 - I went to the University Bookstore today; I bought everything I needed for school. I found a composition notebook, pens, and school t-shirts.
 - I could **NOT** do this:
 - I went to the University Bookstore today; I bought everything I needed for school; I found a composition notebook, pens, and school t-shirts.

- There are several reasons to add semicolons to the above sentences. One of those reasons could be style: the three short sentences are simplistic, choppy, and abrupt. Adding semicolons to the short sentences will create a more complex rhetorical setup; it will eliminate two of the choppy sentences by creating one longer, more complex sentence and one short sentence. Adding semicolons to otherwise truncated sentences results in a transformation from a simple sentence to a more complex one.

- Another reason I might use semicolons is to emphasize a relationship between two sentences. If I connect "I bought everything I needed for school" and "I found a composition notebook, pens, and school t-shirts" together in one sentence, it may emphasize to readers that the relationship between these statements is significant for some reason (perhaps these supplies are solely used for educational purposes).