

The semicolon can be a very confusing mark of punctuation. It's often incorrectly used, and many will avoid it altogether because they're unsure of the exact rules regarding its use.

The semicolon has also been the subject of controversy. Many consider its correct use to be the mark of a well-educated individual, while others consider it a sign of snobbery. It's rarely ever absolutely necessary, and if we threw the semicolon out of the grammar books altogether, we could still form sentences and have proper grammar.

But that's essentially what makes it so special. It's a wonderful little tool that, when used correctly, can enhance our writing and the way our audience understands it.

It's actually very simple:

SENTENCE (IC); SENTENCE (IC)

The semicolon is used when indicating a close relationship between two complete sentences (independent clauses). A period could be used, but the writer does not want the connection to be broken abruptly by the use of a full stop.

- Both what precedes and what follows a semicolon must be complete sentences that could stand alone.
- The semicolon binds those independent clauses more closely than they would be if separated by a period.
- The semicolon often replaces a conjunction such as *and* or *but*.

Examples:

- I like to go to the CNE in September; I wait all year to eat a deep-fried Mars bar.
- Kaitlin goes to the emergency room all the time; they know her by name.
- I'm too tired; I can't stay awake any longer.
- Jonathan drives a Mercedes; Anne drives a Chevrolet.

Conjunctive Adverbs

You can also use a semicolon when you join two independent clauses together with a conjunctive adverb, e.g. *however, moreover, therefore, consequently, otherwise, nevertheless, thus*.

Examples:

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- I don't like onions; however, I don't taste them in this soup.
 - Because Kevin was sick, he missed a lot of classes; consequently, he failed the course.
 - Cindy was afraid that she might use a semicolon incorrectly; therefore, she avoided them altogether.

Remember: semicolons may not be used with a **coordinating conjunction**. Coordinating conjunctions include: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.* (**FANBOYS**)

Semicolons in Lists

The semicolon is used as a divisor to make meaning clear in a sentence where commas are being used for other purposes. A common example of this use is to separate the items of a list when some of the items themselves contain commas.

A: *I've been to Honolulu, Hawaii, Leipzig, Germany, New York City, London, England, and Winnipeg.*

How many places have I been?

We are lost in a sea of commas! In this case, we will use the semicolon to separate the items in the list. The semicolon will clean the commas up, bring order to the sentence, and make things clear.

B: *I've been to Honolulu, Hawaii; Leipzig, Germany; New York City; London, England; and Winnipeg.*

Now how many places have I been?

Extra Notes

- Be careful not to use semicolons excessively. They can become addictive for some writers and, if overused, they lose their flair.
- It's helpful to know that the em dash (—) follows a similar set of rules, except that it is used to create emphasis — the em dash should also be used sparingly!