

The Semicolon

A semicolon is half-comma and half-period. Unlike the comma, it is strong enough to join independent clauses together and control their flow with a stop, but that stop indicates a closely linked idea that follows. The semicolon also separates items in serial lists. Do not capitalize the word following the semicolon.

1. Use a semicolon between two related independent clauses of equal emphasis.

Most science fiction novels have a quest structure; the final challenges in *Brave New World* exemplify this story arc.

Summer road construction in Montreal has hindered travel around town; streets have become strewn with bulldozers, trucks, and cones.

2. Use a semicolon to correct a comma splice. This is a type of run-on sentence created when two independent clauses are joined using a comma. The comma splice may not seem problematic in a compound sentence that only includes two short independent clauses (though it is still an error), but with longer sentences, the flow, connection, and logic among ideas can be disrupted without a stronger stop. (See the BU Writing Centre's *The Comma Splice Repair Guide*.)

Incorrect	The symphony was brilliant, the audience gave the orchestra a standing ovation.
Correct	The symphony was brilliant; the audience gave the orchestra a standing ovation.

In this example, the comma splice could have been corrected with a period, but the semicolon suggests a close relationship (in this case a causal relationship) between the ideas of the two clauses. Here, the reader understands that the audience applauded the orchestra because the symphony was brilliant.

3. Use a semicolon to join two independent clauses when the second clause begins with a conjunctive adverb (however, therefore, moreover, furthermore, thus, meanwhile, nonetheless, otherwise, in fact, for example, in addition, in other words, even so, etc.). The semicolon precedes the conjunctive adverb, and a comma comes after it.

Learning a second language is challenging; however, the rewards are worth the struggle.

Children should experience boredom; as a result, their creativity will flourish.

NOTE: Be sure that you do not write sentence fragments after semicolons. This problem is especially common with the transitional phrase “for example.” This error can be corrected by including a **subject and verb** before “heated seats and adjustable cup holders”:

Incorrect	Newer vehicles come with amenities; for example, heated seats and adjustable cup holders.
Correct	Newer vehicles come with amenities; for example, they have heated seats and adjustable cup holders.

4. Use a semicolon to separate words in a series if there are already commas. Simply using more commas to separate those complex items creates confusion.

Incorrect	Performances during the ceremony include Sunny Chang, piano, Ivan Kravchenko, violin, and Sean McLachlan, bagpipes.
Correct	Performances during the ceremony include Sunny Chang, piano; Ivan Kravchenko, violin; and Sean McLachlan, bagpipes.
Incorrect	Recent sites of the Olympic Games include Tokyo, Japan, Beijing, China, PyeongChang, South Korea, and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
Correct	Recent sites of the Olympic Games include Tokyo, Japan; Beijing, China; PyeongChang, South Korea; and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

5. In-text citations with multiple sources use semicolons to divide them.

Numerous studies have established connections between quality of sleep and academic performance (Alqudah et al., 2019; Gruber et al., 2016; Cusick et al., 2018).
School curricula should reflect a society’s values (Burke 3; Dewey 21).

Material paraphrased from:

http://writing.uwo.ca/img/pdfs/handouts_new/The%20Semicolon.pdf

References:

<https://prowritingaid.com/Semicolon>

