



SEMICOLON

Use **semicolons** sparingly. Remember, they are **not** always interchangeable with commas or colons. It is useful to know how semicolons are **not** used by reviewing instances that call for a comma or colon, but first, let's look at how semicolons **are** used.

Semicolons are used in two ways.

- 1) Use a semicolon to *connect* two closely related sentences (independent clauses).** Note: An independent clause is sometimes called a main clause. It is a group of words having a subject and verb that can stand alone because it makes sense. *This sentence is an example of an independent clause.*

Examples

When writing an essay, first brainstorm for ideas; jotting down all ideas will give you a large pool of information.

I want to attend a four-year college after graduating from Meramec; hopefully, I will be able to make good grades to do this.

After college, I plan to open my own business; the hard work I'm doing now will eventually pay off.

Note: In the three examples above, a *period* could be used in place of the semicolon to *separate* the independent clauses.

If the independent clauses are **not** *closely related*, do **not** join them with a semicolon.

Don't Do This

No: *My last class was hard; I like spaghetti.*

In this sentence, there is no clear connection between a hard class and my liking spaghetti.

No: *My last class was hard; because I didn't get enough sleep.*

In this sentence, we might make a connection between the class being hard and my not getting sleep, but that connection isn't clear.

Do This

Yes: *My last class was hard; I couldn't pay attention because I didn't get enough sleep last night.*

The connection is made clearly in this sentence: the class was hard *as a result* of my not sleeping enough the night before.

Also, if one word group is a dependent clause (lacks a subject or verb, and cannot stand alone), it cannot be joined by a semicolon to the independent clause.

Don't Do This

No: *My class this morning was hard; because I was sleepy.*

The semicolon is used incorrectly here because the second word group is not an independent clause. It is a fragment that depends on the first part of the sentence to make sense.

No: *Since I went to class; the test was easier than I expected.*

Again, the fragment is in the first part of the sentence. It depends on the second half to complete its meaning.

Do This

Yes: *My class this morning was hard; I was sleepy because I stayed up late working on my paper.*

The semicolon is used correctly here because both word groups are independent clauses. We could replace the semicolon with a period to separate the clauses and make two sentences. However, since there is a clear relationship between the class being hard and my not getting sleep, we may join the clauses with a semicolon.

Yes: *Since I went to class, I understood more; the test was easier than I expected.*

Now, each word group has a subject and verb and makes sense. Connecting them with a semicolon is correct because the ideas are closely related.

2) Use a semicolon to separate items in a series that already contains commas (sometimes called internal punctuation)

Examples

Last vacation we bought postcards in towns with unusual names: Remote, Oregon; Inspiration, Arizona; and Bragadoccio, Missouri.

I read for numerous reasons: to relax after a busy day, especially in front of a warm, roaring fire; to learn something new, even while being entertained; to escape, as if I could put myself into the story and live a different life.

Note: If we separate such items with commas, it would be unclear where one item left off and another began.

Semicolons do not work the same as commas and colons. A quick review of how these punctuation marks are used will help us see the difference.

We use **commas** to provide pauses in a sentence for specific reasons. (Taking a breath is not one of the reasons.) **Commas** set off certain word groups in a sentence. Three word groups introduce, interrupt or add-on to a sentence.

Examples

- 1) Use a comma after a word or word group that introduces:

Most of the time, I revise sentences that seem wordy. However, I don't always have time. Because I am busy, I read aloud to find mistakes.

- 2) Use a comma before and after a word or word group that interrupts:

Studying for a test, like any difficult task, requires me to set aside time to work well. My ability to do well on the test, or any other task requiring concentration, means that I also need a good night's sleep.

- 3) Use a comma before a word or word group added on:

The best way to proofread a paper is to read aloud, even if you feel awkward. This will allow you to hear mistakes, if any.

Colons are used as pointers between a sentence and a word or word group.

Examples

- 1) Use a colon as a pointer before an idea or group of details, such as an example, list, or quotation:

While I was a student at Meramec, I had one thing in mind: learning. (example)

The reasons for my desire to get an education are obvious: curiosity, employment opportunities, and a drive to succeed. (list)

I saw a bumper sticker that sums up my attitude about an education: "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." (quotation)

Colons may also be used to separate certain types of information.

Examples

- 2) Use colons as a separator between specific information as required by convention

Biblical references:	<i>Genesis 1:1</i>
Business letter salutations:	<i>Dear Professor Devall:</i>
Periodical volume and number:	<i>Harper's 2203:16</i>
Etc.	

Summary

Semicolons are used in two ways: 1) to connect two closely related independent clauses, and 2) separate items in a series that has internal punctuation.

An **independent clause** is a group of words having both a subject and a verb, and can stand on its own. A simple sentence is an example of an independent clause.

Commas are used in three main instances: 1) after a group of words that introduce an independent clause, 2) before and after a group of words that interrupt an independent clause, and 3) before a group of words added on to an independent clause.

Colons are used after independent clauses to point to certain types of words, groups of words, or a series that follows the independent clause. Colons are also used to separate information in specific instances.