

The Semicolon

The semicolon (;) both separates and joins sentences together. It functions more like a period than a comma or colon (despite its name and appearance). Semicolons can sometimes be used to separate items in a list when the items in the list contain commas.

Correct Usage

The key to using the semicolon correctly in a sentence is to ensure two independent clauses appear on either side, and that the second does *not* begin with a coordinating conjunction (for, and, or, yet, nor, so, but). An independent clause is a series of words that contains a subject (noun) and a predicate (verb). In effect, the semicolon demonstrates the interrelatedness of two independent clauses in the same way as a coordinating conjunction.

A recent astronomical discovery supports the likelihood of life elsewhere in our solar system; there appear to have been subterranean oceans on Mars.

Notice how the meaning of each clause relies on context afforded by the other. A period here would be grammatically correct, but the semicolon signals the relationship between the two ideas.

Semicolons can demonstrate *contrast* to great effect.

Adele won the 2016 Grammy for Best Album; Beyonce did not.

Note: If two independent clauses are separated by a comma without a coordinating conjunction, the result is a **comma splice**. Replacing the comma with a semicolon is a simple fix. (The CBU Writing Centre has a handout on **comma splices**, **fused sentences**, and **run-on sentences**.)

Compare...

Last night we caught a dozen trout, this morning we haven't gotten a bite.

With...

Last night we caught a dozen trout; this morning we haven't gotten a bite.

In the latter example, the semicolon suggests a verbal full stop like a period but still implies the close relationship between the two independent clauses, as with a comma. As with comma splices, semicolons are an easy fix for **fused sentences**. A fused sentence occurs when two independent clauses appear in a row without a comma and coordinating conjunction, or semicolon. Thus:

A compass is essential for hiking it can save your life.

As in previous examples, the semicolon solution is simple; it preserves the implied verbal pause while indicating the important connection between the two clauses. Here, the semicolon connects the pronoun “it” with the subject “compass” from the previous clause.

A compass is essential for hiking; it can save your life.

The bottom line: A semicolon should always distinguish two independent clauses.