The Semicolon

Semicolons are stronger than commas, but weaker than periods. They are always used between elements of equal grammatical rank; therefore, they create a sense of balance or symmetry in your writing. Their two main functions are explained below.

1. The vast majority of semicolons are used where a period would also be correct. They occur between two independent clauses not linked by a conjunction (and, but, or, nor, yet, for, so). The clauses should be closely related in meaning.

   Ann likes fudge, cappuccino, and butterscotch brownies;
   Jim prefers peppermints, cafe mocha, and Nanaimo bars.

   "While there is a lower class, I am in it; while there is a criminal element, I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free."   Eugene Debbs

   Note that the first example creates a sense of balanced contrast, while the second suggests one parallel idea building on another.

Semicolons are often used with conjunctive adverbs like however, therefore, and nevertheless.

   The runs at Whistler are unequalled; however, the weather is unreliable.

   Note that the semicolon shows to which clause however applies.

Semicolons offer you one means of correcting comma splices (commas used between independent clauses not linked by a conjunction).

   Nola has to work a double shift, she won't be able to come to the movies.
   (incorrect--comma splice)

   Nola has to work a double shift; she won't be able to come to the movies.  (correct--semicolon)
However, semicolons are most effective when they are used sparingly. It's often best to fix a comma splice by adding the conjunction that best indicates the link of thought.

Nola has to work a double shift, so she won’t be able to come to the movies. (coordinating conjunction—equal emphasis)

Because Nola has to work a double shift, she won’t be able to come to the movies. (subordinating conjunction—emphasis on first clause)

2. Also use semicolons between complex elements arranged in a list or series, especially if the items in the series have internal commas.

Members of the 1986-87 Capilano College Student Society Executive who were elected prior to the opening of the fall semester are the following: Theresa Newlove, President; Irwin Oostindie, Vice-President Internal; Paul Edwards, Vice-President External; Imtiaz Popat, Communications Coordinator; and Chris Kaulback, Ombudsperson.

Previous recorded eruptions of the volcano occurred on December 30, 1853; October 16, 1875; July 27, 1901; and November 29, 1939.

Without the semicolons, you would not know where one item ended and the next began.