

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.