




Semicolons

The semicolon is used to indicate a major division in a sentence.



Explanation

- A semicolon is best when you need a more distinct separation between clauses or items on a list than is indicated by a comma (*e.g.*, between the two clauses of a compound sentence).

Example:

The movie was hilarious; we laughed until we turned red.

- Semicolons are used to link independent clauses not joined by coordinating conjunctions. Semicolons should join only those independent clauses that are closely related in meaning.

Examples:

Aerobic exercises help prevent back pain; proper posture is also important.

The consultant made six recommendations; however, only one has been adopted so far.



Do not...

...use a semicolon to link a dependent clause or a phrase to an independent clause.

Example:

Wrong—Although maintaining a high level of physical fitness takes a lot of time; the effort pays off in the long run.

Right—Although maintaining a high level of physical fitness takes a lot of time, the effort pays off in the long run.



Also...

- Generally, you should not place a semicolon before a coordinating conjunction that links two independent clauses. The only exception to this guideline is if the two independent clauses are very long and already contain a number of commas.

Example:

Wrong—The economy has been sluggish for five years now; but some signs of improvement are finally beginning to show.

Right—The economy has been sluggish for five years now, but some signs of improvement are finally beginning to show.

- A semicolon can also be used between items in a series containing internal punctuation.

Example:

There are several Applebee's in Atlanta, Georgia; Greenville, South Carolina; Pensacola, Florida; and Mobile, Alabama.



Example

Jonathan's mother believes three things: that every situation, no matter how grim, will be happily resolved; that no one knows more about human nature than she; and that Jonathan, who is thirty-five years old, will never be able to do his own laundry.