



Figure 1 The Writing Center and Academic Resource Center logo

Semicolons

A semicolon is a very strong punctuation mark; it is more like a period than a comma. Semicolons are used in three places:

- Between two sentences that are closely connected in idea.
- Before conjunctive adverbs and some transitional phrases.
- Between items in a series if the items already contain commas (Oshima 257).

I. **Between Two Sentences:**

A semicolon can be used instead of a period between any two sentences that are closely related in meaning. You could also use a period, but when the sentences are connected in meaning, it is better to use a semicolon. The term *independent clause* is the same as a sentence, as it must have a subject and a verb, and is a complete idea on its own.

Independent Clause; - <i>Independent Clause</i> <i>(A Sentence), (A closely related sentence)</i>
Tomatoes are not vegetables; <i>they are fruits.</i>
I hope to do well on my final; <i>my scholarship depends on a high GPA.</i>
My cat never gets full; <i>she could eat all day.</i>

A semicolon is used between the two independent clauses of a compound sentence when they are *not* joined by a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so = FANBOYS).

Each of the sentences above could also be made into *two separate sentences* by replacing the semicolon with a period. Note that the first word after a semicolon is *not* capitalized (unless it is a proper noun).

II. Before Connectors:

Use a semicolon before conjunctive adverbs such as however, therefore, nevertheless, moreover, and furthermore; a semicolon can also be used before some transitional phrases such as for example, as a result, that is, in fact, etc. (*Note that a comma follows the conjunctive adverb.*)

Independent Clause; Connector, Independent Clause
I've always wanted to go to London; <i>however</i> , I never have the money.
My friend doesn't know how to swim; <i>therefore</i> , she never goes to the beach.

The connector (conjunctive adverb) does not have to be placed immediately following the semicolon:

It was cold; *therefore*, we went inside.

It was cold; we, *therefore*, went inside.

It was cold; we went inside, *therefore*.

Here is a partial list of conjunctive adverbs:

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Conjunctive Adverbs</u></p> <p>Consequently, indeed, nevertheless Furthermore, in fact, then, However, moreover, therefore</p>

III. Between items in a series if the items already contain commas.

I cannot decide which instrument I like best: the cello, with its deep, sonorous tones; the piano, with its ability to play all kinds of music; or the guitar, with its portability and its haunting, plaintive chords.

Exercise #1

Combine each pair of independent clauses by placing a semicolon between them.

1. Janet Jackson has been promoted she is an effective manager.
2. My father always played baseball with me he always let me win.
3. The new guitar catalog, a 300 page volume, was misplaced the volume cost twenty dollars.
4. My mother wanted to leave early for the trip we had all overslept.

5. It rained all day yesterday the news forecast hadn't predicted a storm.

Exercise #2:

Punctuate each sentence correctly by adding a semicolon, a comma, or both.

1. I hate to wash my car's windows nevertheless it's a job that must be done.
2. My guitar is old and rusty however it sounds beautiful.
3. We toured the darkroom then we watched the models pose for the photographer.
4. School is very important therefore I make put a lot of effort into my studies.

Also see Writing Center handouts on Fragments and on Run-On Sentences.

This handout is based on the following texts:

Azar, Betty Schramper. Understanding and Using English Grammar. 2nd ed, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents.
Oshima, Alice, and Ann Hogue. Writing Academic English. 2nd ed. New York: Addison-Wesley. 267.

For further reference, see the following book:

Fawcett, Susan and Sandberg, Alvin. Evergreen with Readings: A Guide to Writing. 4th ed. Boston.
Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992. 326-329

The above texts are available in The Writing Center.

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