



How to Use a Semicolon

The semicolon has two uses:

1. To connect two related independent clauses (complete sentences) in order to emphasize a relationship between the clauses.
2. To separate items in a list that already has commas.

When in doubt, take the semicolon out and make two separate sentences.

1. A semicolon is used to connect two independent clauses.

Example:

Ferdinand the cat knocked over the television in a playful romp. He was ashamed of his expensive accident.

Ferdinand the cat knocked over the television in a playful romp; he was ashamed of his expensive accident.

The semicolon is connecting two complete sentences to form one longer sentence.

Semicolons should only be used to connect two complete sentences that relate to each other.

WRONG: Ferdinand the cat knocked over the television in a playful romp; I like to dance with talking horses in the house.

This usage of the semicolon does not work because the two clauses do not relate to each other at all. While both actions may occur in the same house, they do not directly connect with each other.

CORRECT: I like to dance with talking horses in the house; my neighbors think that I am crazy.

This usage works because the clauses relate to each other. People would think you were crazy if they thought you danced with talking horses in your home; therefore, these sentences relate to each other.

Semicolons take the place of conjunctions (such as *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, and *so*) when connecting two complete sentences. So, do not use conjunctions when using a semicolon. A semicolon can be used when using connecting words such as *however*, *therefore*, and *meanwhile* or transition words such as *on the other hand*, *for example*, and *in fact*.

WRONG: Ferdinand the cat knocked over the television in a playful romp; but he did not knock over the lava lamp.

For this sentence, just a comma will work. No need for a semicolon! Semicolons take the place of conjunctions. Using a semicolon and a conjunction is like saying: I like cats but but I don't like their fur.

CORRECT: Ferdinand the cat knocked over the television in a playful romp; however, he did not knock over the lava lamp.

CORRECT: Ferdinand the cat knocked over the television in a playful romp; in fact, it was the most playful romp he had ever had.

A semicolon is acceptable in these sentences because in most cases, it acts as a conjunction. If you replace the semicolon with a conjunction the sentence would still make sense. This rule does not always work for connecting words, however – so be careful!

Examples for use two: Semicolons can also be used to form lists of items that are separated by commas.

Betsy has skipped to Gallop, New Jersey; Frolic, Maine; and Oostburg, Wisconsin.

When listing cities with their states in a list, it is necessary to have a semicolon. If there weren't semicolons separating these items, readers would get confused reading a sentence with a ton of commas.

The authors I will discuss in my essay are Joseph Hornswaggle, the renowned author of twenty books; Kim Flooper, a frequent blogger; and Henry Tintin, my neighbor whose journal I stole.

When making a list of people, it might be nice to clarify what they do. If you clarify items in your list using commas, you need to separate each item with a semicolon.

For more information on semicolons or more examples, go to:

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/566/1/>

<http://theoatmeal.com/comics/semicolon>

<http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/Semicolons.html>