



How to use Semicolons in Academic Writing

A-State Online Writing Center

Semicolons can be a useful punctuation mark and enhance your writing when employed correctly. Below are common reasons and ways to use them with provided examples.

Linking Two Independent Clauses

You can use semicolons to link two independent clauses that are similar in topic rather than separating them with a period or comma. Note that an independent clause can stand alone as its own sentence as opposed to a dependent clause which can't. See the resource link at the bottom of the page for explicit differences between the two.

For instance:

When a driver honks, I get angry.

The example above uses a comma because the first clause is dependent and the second is independent. However, if the phrase read:

The driver honked at me; I immediately felt angry.

Each clause can stand alone as its own sentence, but because the ideas are connected, you can add a semicolon to combine them into one sentence. Note that you don't need to capitalize the first letter of the second independent clause unless it's part of an acronym or proper noun (i.e., personal pronoun "I", names, regions, days of the week, institutions, company names).

Another example:

Thank you for running those errands; that makes me feel more at ease.

Using Independent Clauses Linked by Conjunctive Adverbs

Conjunctive Adverbs connect two sentences or clauses together by acting as a coordinating conjunction (i.e., and, but, yet, or, etc.). Once again, they are connected by topic. Common conjunctive adverbs are transitional words or phrases such as *however, moreover, in addition,*

also, meanwhile, consequently, and furthermore. When using a conjunctive adverb to transition between ideas within an independent clause, precede the word or phrase with a semicolon and include a comma afterward.

Examples:

I could have run those errands; however, I wouldn't have been able to do it until late at night.

I need you to go to the store; also, it would be great if you can go to the bank as well.

The highlighted area indicates the conjunctive adverb between two independent clauses separated by a semicolon and comma.

Using Semicolons in Serial Lists

Semicolons are an excellent way to keep items in a list or series separate so the reader understands which parts of the sentence in the list are distinct. Otherwise, it can get fairly confusing to solely use commas and lengthy to separate everything into multiple sentences.

Examples

While she was at the store, she bought delicious, juicy pears; fuzzy, warm socks; five multicolored, massive pumpkins; and ingredients for banana bread.

I knew I wanted to spend my Sunday mowing the lawn because it needs trimming; watching light-hearted movies with my sister, who loves comedies; and cooking meals for the rest of the week.

By separating these items with semicolons, the reader can easily understand which segments are connected without having to re-read it.

Works Consulted

- <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/rwc/repository/files/grammar-and-mechanics/sentence-structure/Using-Transitional-Expressions.pdf>
- <https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/grammarpunct/semicolons/>
- <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/semicolon/>

More Resources

- https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/punctuation/independent_and_dependent_clauses/index.html
- <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/semi-colons-colons-and-dashes/>
- <https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/grammarpunct/conjadv/>
- <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/coordinating-conjunctions/>
- <https://onlinewritingtraining.com.au/however-therefore-furthermore/>