

Semicolons



How do semicolons function in a sentence?

You have three options for putting punctuation between two complete sentences. Most often, you will use a period. Other times, you may join together two sentences with a conjunction (i.e., and, but) and a comma. In the third option, discussed here, you can join together two sentences using a semicolon. Using a semicolon can help you suggest to the reader that there is a particular connection between the two sentences that the reader should think about.

How and when do writers use semicolons?

Joining two related independent clauses (complete thoughts/sentences) in a sentence

Writing papers may take a mental toll; use frequent naps to help the mind recuperate.

The initial popularity of the Beatles did not fade; "Love Me Do" was the first of twenty-seven number one hits for the group.

Joining two independent clauses using words such as "however" and "nonetheless"

My fingers were cramping from overuse; nonetheless, I continued to type.

Thousands of fans flocked to stadiums to see the Beatles; however, no one could hear the band over the crowd's roar.

Indicating a break within a list that already uses commas (this is the *only* time a semicolon takes the place of a comma)

On our roadtrip, we visited Louisville, Kentucky; Athens, Georgia; and Austin, Texas.

The Beatles were John Lennon, guitarist; Paul McCartney, bassist; George Harrison, guitarist; and Ringo Starr, drummer.

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When do writers avoid using a semicolon?

Joining two clauses which are not *both* independent

Megen locked her keys in the car; because she is forgetful.

Riding a bicycle down the street; Doris waved to her friends.

I meant to do the dishes today; but I took a nap instead.

(Each of these examples needs a comma instead.)

Introducing a list

Television can do many things; introduce new ideas, present compelling stories, and fry your retinas.

(The correct punctuation mark here is a colon.)