

# Semicolons, Commas, and Periods (Oh My)!

A handy guide to some oft-confused punctuation.

## 1. Semicolons connect independent clauses.

My aunt makes the best sweet tea in the world. She will never divulge the secret recipe.

These two sentences are separated by a period, but they can be combined, as they discuss the same topic. You can also use them if you want to indicate contrast.

Billy loves eating fried crocodile; little does he know that crocodiles would love eating fried Billy.

Semicolons connect main clauses, i.e. groups of words with a subject and verb that could function as a complete sentence on their own.

If you were to use a comma to link main clauses, it would be a comma splice. Think of commas as being too weak to hold main clauses together without the help of a conjunction. Semicolons, however, are extra-strength.

**Incorrect:** William Blake is a time-travelling alien, he has saved humanity countless times.

**Correct:** William Blake is a time-travelling alien; he has saved humanity countless times.

If you use a conjunction *and* and a semicolon to link main clauses, it is technically incorrect. You need one or the other, not both.

**Incorrect:** I used to love skiing; but now I prefer to stay at home and talk to my cats.

**Correct:** I used to love skiing, but now I prefer to stay at home and talk to my cats.

-OR-

I used to love skiing; now I prefer to stay at home and talk to my cats.

You can, however, use conjunctive adverbs (also, anyway, besides, finally, however, meanwhile, otherwise, therefore, and others) or transitional phrases (after all, as a result, for example, in conclusion, in other words) after a semicolon. They are not as strong as normal conjunctions, so they need a semicolon to help them hold the sentence together.

I would love to ride a blimp; however, fear of heights and exploding hydrogen inhibit me.

-OR-

I am a somewhat cowardly person; for example, I once ran away from an angry chicken.

Think of semicolons as thoughtful pauses, as opposed to the full stop indicated by a period. Semicolons can fluidly link two complete ideas without the need for conjunctions.

## 2. Semicolons also act like “super commas.”

Semicolons are not only used to link main clauses. They can also be used in complicated lists. Elements in a list are usually separated by commas. But if the elements themselves contain commas, semicolons are used to separate them.

**Incorrect:** We stopped in many places along our journey, including Louisville, Kentucky, Branson, Missouri, and Gonzales, Louisiana, the Jambalaya Capital of the World.

**Correct:** We stopped in many places along our journey, including Louisville, Kentucky; Branson, Missouri; and Gonzales, Louisiana, the Jambalaya Capital of the World.

You see, the first version of the sentence is difficult to understand clearly. The semicolons create a more distinct separation between the complex elements of the list to avoid confusion.

Don't be intimidated by semicolons just because they are uncommon! They are useful and can help you link your ideas clearly and smoothly.

References: Purdue OWL, The Oatmeal, University of Richmond Writer's Web