

Helpful Hints for Using Semicolons

1. Semicolons Connect Related Independent Clauses

You can use a semicolon to join two closely related independent clauses. Let's put that another way. The group of words that comes before the semicolon should form a complete sentence, the group of words that comes after the semicolon should form a complete sentence, and the two sentences should share a close, *logical connection*:

1. I ordered a cheeseburger for lunch; life's too short for counting calories.
2. Money is the root of all evil; I don't believe the reverse is necessarily true.
3. Martha has gone to the library; Andrew has gone to play soccer.

Notice that the letter following the semicolon is not capitalized. The examples above are both made up of two complete, grammatically correct sentences glued together. Yes, that means there are four total sentences up there—and thanks to the semicolon, only two capital letters. That's exactly why you can't substitute a comma for a semicolon.

2. Delete the Conjunction When You Use a Semicolon

A semicolon isn't the only thing that can link two independent clauses. Conjunctions (that's your ands, buts, and ors) can do that too. But you shouldn't use a semicolon and a conjunction. That means when you use a semicolon, you use it instead of the ands, buts, and ors; you don't need both.

Original: I saw a magnificent albatross, and it was eating a mouse.

With semicolon: I saw a magnificent albatross; it was eating a mouse.

To summarize, a semicolon links up two related ideas by narrowing the gap between the ideas of two separate sentences or by replacing a conjunction between two related ideas. Looking at one of the sentences from above, we see that a conjunction has been replaced by a semicolon.

Original: Martha has gone to the library, and Andrew has gone to play soccer.

With semicolon: Martha has gone to the library; Andrew has gone to play soccer.

3. Use Semicolons in a Serial List

You can use semicolons to divide the items of a list if the items are long or contain internal punctuation. In these cases, the semicolon helps readers keep track of the divisions between the items.

1. I need the weather statistics for the following cities: London, England; London, Ontario; Paris, France; Paris, Ontario; Perth, Scotland; Perth, Ontario.
2. My plan included taking him to a nice—though not necessarily expensive—dinner; going to the park to look at the stars, which, by the way, are amazing this time of year; and serenading him with my accordion.

4. Use Semicolons with Conjunctive Adverbs

When you have a conjunctive adverb linking two independent clauses, you should use a semicolon. Some common conjunctive adverbs include *moreover*, *nevertheless*, *however*, *otherwise*, *therefore*, *then*, *finally*, *likewise*, and *consequently*.

1. I needed to go for a walk and get some fresh air; also, I needed to buy milk.
2. Reports of the damage caused by the hurricane were greatly exaggerated; indeed, the storm was not a “hurricane” at all.
3. The students had been advised against walking alone at night; however, Cathy decided walking wasn’t dangerous if it was early in the evening.
4. I’m not all that fond of the colors of tiger lilies; moreover, they don’t smell very good.

These words sometimes show up in other parts of a sentence; therefore, the semicolon rule only applies if it helps the conjunctive adverb join two independent clauses. (See what we did there?) This conjunctive adverb rule is similar to the conjunction rule. In both cases, check that the two ideas are independent clauses that could stand on their own as sentences. If so, then you’re grammatically good to go as far as the semicolon is concerned.