

The Semicolon ;

The semicolon (;) separates two clauses of equal importance in a sentence. It is sometimes used to separate items in a series. The following list explains when and where to use semicolons.

1. Joining two main clauses

Use a semicolon when two main clauses in a sentence are not joined by *and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet* or another joining word.

Example

Most American schools offer only English education programs; schools in Canada provide both English and French immersion programs.

2. Joining two clauses with a transitional expression

Use a semicolon between independent clauses linked with a transitional expression. Transitional expressions can be conjunctive adverbs such as *also, anyway, besides, still, otherwise, then, therefore, however*. They can also be transitional phrases such as *after all, as a result, even so, in addition, in other words*.

Example

I practiced all the kicks that the instructor taught; however, I never really learned to fight.

If a transitional expression is placed in the middle or at the end of the second clause, the semicolon goes between the clauses.

Example

Most students learned how to fight; I, however, only learned how to kick.

3. Separating items in a series

Use a semicolon between items in a series containing internal punctuation. By inserting semicolons at the major breaks, the writer helps the reader sort out the major groupings.

Example

Classic American novels are Huckleberry Finn, with the irrepressible Huck and his friend Jim; The Great Gatsby, with the mysterious Jay Gatsby and the enchanting Daisy; and the Catcher in the Rye, with the complex Holden Caulfield.