Success Center
Directed Learning Activity (DLA)

Punctuation 3:
How to Use Semicolons

GO33.1
Directed Learning Activity – How to Use Semicolons

Description: In this Directed Learning Activity (DLA), you will learn the basic uses of a semicolon. Not all writers are fans of the semicolon; it is a much misunderstood punctuation mark. Some writers use it where a colon or comma would be more appropriate, and vice versa; other writers ignore it rather than risk misusing it. Yet the semicolon is not difficult to master. It has a number of uses that can strengthen your writing style. Read what two writers have said about semicolons:

It is almost always a greater pleasure to come across a semicolon than a period. The period tells you that that is that; if you didn’t get all the meaning you wanted or expected, anyway, you got all the writer intended to parcel out, and now you have to move along. But with a semicolon, there you get a pleasant little feeling of expectancy; there is more to come; read on; it will get clearer.

– Lewis Thomas

Semicolons . . . signal, rather than shout, a relationship . . . A semicolon is a compliment from the writer to the reader. It says: “I don’t have to draw you a picture; a hint will do.”

– George Will

Prior Knowledge: No prior knowledge is required, but it will be helpful to know the definition of a clause. A clause is a group of words that contains both a subject and a verb. An independent clause contains a subject and a verb, and it expresses a complete thought; in other words, it is a complete sentence.

Step One: Assessing Prior Knowledge

On the lines below, explain what you already know about semicolons. Don’t look ahead or use other sources of information. Try and write something down, but if you don’t know anything about semicolons, then write that you don’t know.

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Step Two: Understanding the Uses of Semicolons

In this DLA, you will learn about three uses of semicolons: to combine closely related independent clauses that are not joined with a coordinating conjunction, to combine independent clauses linked with a transitional expression, and to separate items in a series when they contain other punctuation marks. Carefully read the explanations and examples below before attempting these techniques yourself in the practice exercises.

I. Use a semicolon between closely related independent clauses that are not joined with a coordinating conjunction.
**Explanation:** Typically, two independent clauses are combined into one compound sentence with a comma and a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, for, or, nor, so, or yet*). The coordinating conjunctions signal the relationship between the clauses. However, if the relationship is clear without the conjunction, then a semicolon can be used instead.

**Examples:**

- *No one was in sight, so I was alone in the huge auditorium.* [comma + conjunction]
- *No one was in sight; I was alone in the huge auditorium.* [semicolon]

- *The cashier took my money, and he put it in the cash register.* [comma + conjunction]
- *The cashier took my money; he put it in the cash register.* [semicolon]

- *Some people write with a word processor, but others write with a pen or pencil.* [comma + conjunction]
- *Some people write with a word processor; others write with a pen or pencil.* [semicolon]

A semicolon is stronger than a comma and less forceful than a period. It should be used whenever a coordinating conjunction has been omitted between independent clauses. If you put only a comma between the two clauses, you have created a comma splice, which is an error.

**Be careful!** The word after a semicolon is not capitalized unless it is a proper noun or the pronoun *I*.

**II. Use a semicolon between independent clauses linked with a transitional expression.**

**Explanation:** Transitional expressions can be conjunctive adverbs or transitional phrases.

**CONJUNCTIVE ADVERBS**

- accordingly
- also
- however
- likewise
- therefore
- incidentally
- specifically
- anyway
- besides
- otherwise
- then
- nevertheless
- instead
- still
- certainly
- consequently
- indeed
- furthermore
- thus
- meanwhile
- subsequently
- conversely
- finally
- similarly
- moreover
- nonetheless
- next
- initially

**TRANSITIONAL PHRASES**

- in addition
- for example
- for instance
- that is to say
- after all
- at the same time
- in contrast
- on the contrary
- in conclusion
- to summarize
- as a result
- even so
- in the meantime
- in the same way
- in other words
- of course
- at any rate
- more importantly
- on the other hand
- in the first place
- in fact
- as a matter of fact

**Examples:**

- *He studies hard; therefore, he earns excellent grades.*
Many corals grow very gradually; in fact, the creation of a coral reef can take centuries.

Five of the applicants had worked with spreadsheets; however, only one was familiar with database management.

Not many of us found the presentations helpful; even so, we attended every one and took notes.

Most of the students weren’t paying attention in class; instead, they were texting or sleeping.

Karen couldn’t find her keys anywhere; finally, she looked under the front seat of her car and found them.

Finding the best major can be a challenge; in addition, completing the courses takes dedication.

In the past, dogs commonly had descriptive names; for instance, people often named their dogs Spot and Fluffy.

III. Use a semicolon to separate items in a series when they contain other punctuation marks.

Explanation: Semicolons in this situation help the writer to avoid confusion with the other punctuation marks in the sentence.

Examples:
The following people were invited: Tim, my cousin; Erik, a good friend; Sandy, a neighbor; and Belinda, my sister-in-law.

I am currently taking Spanish, which I enjoy; math, which I find difficult; and psychology, which is my favorite subject.

Practice 1: Add semicolons and/or commas to the following sentences.

1. Joey is a good friend of mine however sometimes I don’t trust him.

2. I have several favorite athletes: in basketball Bill Russell in baseball Hank Aaron in tennis Martina Navratilova and in boxing Mohammad Ali.

3. I am really disgusted with my essay I am going to start over with a new topic.

4. I will talk to the class first then the professor will give a short lecture.

5. The crowd was too rowdy therefore the band quit playing and walked off the stage.

6. “Standing in the middle of the road is very dangerous you get knocked down by the traffic from both sides.”

7. “I’ve been rich and I’ve been poor rich is better.”
8. Strong black coffee will not sober you up as a matter of fact time is the only way to get alcohol out of your system.

9. It is not surprising that our society is increasingly violent after all television desensitizes us to brutality at a very early age.

10. At Weight Watchers, we believe that being fat is not hereditary it is a choice.

11. I have lived in San Francisco California Haiku Hawaii Dallas Texas and Santa Barbara California.

12. Martin Luther King Jr. had not intended to be a preacher initially he had planned to become a lawyer.

13. One of my friends wants to get married more importantly he needs to get a job.

14. My history assignment was long and complicated I didn’t finish until 1:00 a.m.

15. The people next door have three huge dogs they bark constantly all day and all night.

**Step Three: Editing for Semicolon Errors**

Now that you have learned the rules, it's time to apply that knowledge to writing. When you write an essay, you must always edit for mistakes. That means critically looking at your grammar and punctuation and correcting any mistakes you have made. The practice exercises in Step Three are meant to help you learn how to edit for semicolon errors.

**Read the paragraph below. There are ten (10) semicolon errors. Some of the sentences need a semicolon inserted, and other sentences need the semicolon taken out or replaced with another punctuation mark. See if you can find all the errors and correct them.**

(1) Our family camping trip to the Sierras provided a week of healthy, refreshing enjoyment. (2) Smog had blanketed the city; but here smog was replaced with blue skies and white clouds. (3) We no longer had to fight for space on the crowded freeways and city streets we parked our camper under huge pine trees and walked wherever we wished. (4) We soon discovered a small stream it was just fifty feet from our campground. (5) The clear, crisp water flowed steadily, gently sprayed the nearby plants, and soothed our feet. (6) We walked upstream right through the middle of the creek. (7) The creek was too small for fishing, we soon discovered newly hatched, half-dollar-sized turtles. (8) We welcomed simply sitting on a rock next to the creek there in the warm sunshine we watched the baby turtles slowly walk by the edge of the water. (9) On the second day, we found blackberry bushes covered with ripe berries, one taste, and we decided to pick some to take back to camp. (10) That evening, we cooked them over the open campfire; and the smell of the berries bubbling in the pan filled the air and blended with the sweet smell of pine trees. (11) We wrapped our thickened berries in tortillas and toasted them over the heat nothing tasted so delicious. (12) The last day before heading home; we hiked several miles to the fire lookout tower. (13) After climbing to the top, we were rewarded with the never-ending view of tall pine trees, oak trees, and exceptionally beautiful blue skies. (14) The next morning, we packed up our belongings and headed back to the city; but at that moment we vowed to return again as soon as possible.
For Further Practice:
If you would like more practice using semicolons, go to:
http://depts.dyc.edu/learningcenter/owl/exercises/semicolons_ex1.htm or
Tutor Feedback:

_____ The student is able to explain the three uses of a semicolon as outlined in this DLA (They are used between two related independent clauses, between two independent clauses linked with a transition, and between items in a series that already contain commas)

_____ In Step Two, the student correctly inserted semicolons and/or commas into the sentences in Practice 1.

_____ In Step Three, the student identified the ten semicolon errors and corrected them.

Additional Comments: __________________________________________________________
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PRINT INSTRUCTOR/TUTOR NAME                                  DATE

INSTRUCTOR/TUTOR SIGNATURE

STUDENT – DO NOT FORGET TO TURN THIS SHEET IN AT THE FRONT DESK!

You may not get credit for completing this DLA if you fail to leave this sheet with the front desk receptionist.