

THE WRITER'S HANDBOOK

USING SEMICOLONS

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Using Semicolons

Semicolons help you connect closely related ideas when a style mark stronger than a comma is needed. By using semicolons effectively, you can make your writing sound more sophisticated.

Connect closely related ideas

- Link two [independent clauses](#) to connect closely related ideas

Some people write with a word processor; others write with a pen or pencil.

- Link clauses connected by [conjunctive adverbs](#) or [transitional phrases](#) to connect closely related ideas

But however they choose to write, people are allowed to make their own decisions; as a result, many people swear by their writing methods.

- Link lists where the items contain commas to avoid confusion between list items

There are basically two ways to write: with a pen or pencil, which is inexpensive and easily accessible; or by computer and printer, which is more expensive but quick and neat.

- Link lengthy clauses or clauses with commas to avoid confusion between clauses

Some people write with a word processor, typewriter, or a computer; but others, for different reasons, choose to write with a pen or pencil.

Rules for Using Semicolons

- A semicolon is most commonly used to link (in a single sentence) two [independent clauses](#) that are closely related in thought.

When a semicolon is used to join two or more ideas (parts) in a sentence, those ideas are then given equal position or rank.

Some people write with a word processor; others write with a pen or pencil.

- Use a semicolon between two [independent clauses](#) that are connected by [conjunctive adverbs](#) or [transitional phrases](#).

But however they choose to write, people are allowed to make their own decisions; as a result, many people swear by their writing methods.

- Use a semicolon between items in a list or series if any of the items contain commas.

There are basically two ways to write: with a pen or pencil, which is inexpensive and easily accessible; or by computer and printer, which is more expensive but quick and neat.

- Use a semicolon between independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction if the clauses are already punctuated with commas or if the clauses are lengthy.

Some people write with a word processor, typewriter, or a computer; but others, for different reasons, choose to write with a pen or pencil.

Avoid using a comma when a semicolon is needed:

Incorrect: The cow is brown, it is also old.
Correct: The cow is brown; it is also old.

What's going on here? Both parts of the sentence are independent clauses, and commas should **not** be used to connect independent clauses if there is no coordinating conjunction. This mistake is known as a **comma splice**.

Incorrect: I like cows, however, I hate the way they smell.
Correct: I like cows; however, I hate the way they smell.

What's going on here? The conjunctive adverb **however** signals a connection between two independent clauses, and commas should **not** be used to connect independent clauses if there is no coordinating conjunction.

Incorrect: I like cows: they give us milk, which tastes good, they give us beef, which also tastes good, and they give us leather, which is used for shoes and coats.
Correct: I like cows: they give us milk, which tastes good; they give us beef, which also tastes good; and they give us leather, which is used for shoes and coats.

What's going on here? It's unclear what the three list items are, since the items are separated by commas.

Incorrect: Cows, though their bovine majesty has been on the wane in recent millenia, are still one of the great species of this planet, domesticated, yet proud, they ruminate silently as we humans pass tumultuously by.
Correct: Cows, though their bovine majesty has been on the wane in recent millenia, are still one of the great species of this planet; domesticated, yet proud, they ruminate silently as we humans pass tumultuously by.

What's going on here? It's unclear where the first independent clause ends and the second independent clause begins.

Avoid using a semicolon when a comma is needed:

Incorrect: Because cows smell; they offend me.
Correct: Because cows smell, they offend me.

What's going on here? The first part is not an independent clause, so no semicolon is required.

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