

THE SEMICOLON

Many people misuse the semicolon. Therefore, if you are able to master its usage and use it correctly in your writing, you will show yourself to be a sophisticated and mature writer.

What is it?

The semicolon (;) is comprised of a dot and a comma arranged vertically. It is used in complicated lists and to link closely related independent clauses. In the spectrum of pauses, it falls between the period and the comma.

IN COMPLICATED LISTS

If you have a list and each item is a multi-word item (or contains internal punctuation), then the semicolon is used to separate each item in the list.

FOR EXAMPLE:

Many distinguished academics will be coming: Mr. Jones, a Professor of English; Dr. Roman, a linguistics specialist; and Sylvia Smith, Professor of Ancient Art.

NOTE: See how a colon precedes the list, but semicolons are used between the items in the list.

TO LINK TWO MAIN CLAUSES

The second use of the semicolon is between two main clauses, where the two independent clauses are closely connected in some way.

FOR EXAMPLE:

Bethany always wears sunscreen; she has extremely fair skin.

Can you see how the second clause is closely linked to the first?



Wait... Why not just use a period or a comma?

You could use a comma, but you would need a coordinating conjunction (as it would be a compound sentence).

Bethany always wears sunscreen, **as** she has extremely fair skin.

Also, you could use a period (full stop), but that would separate the two sentences, and you may wish to show the connection between the two clauses.

Bethany always wears sunscreen. She has extremely fair skin.

So, a semicolon links two independent clauses more than a period, but less than a comma?

YES! Can you see the difference between these?

Toby is moving to New York. He loves city life.

Toby is moving to New York; he loves city life.

Toby is moving to New York, as he loves city life.

All of these are correct, but they have slightly different tones and pause lengths.

NOTE:

- The clauses either side of the semicolon **must** be independent clauses – they should be able to stand alone. If they cannot stand alone, then a semicolon *should not be used*.
- The two clauses should be **closely related** in meaning.
- You don't capitalize the word which follows the semicolon – unless it is a proper noun and is *always* capitalized.