The Semicolon

The semicolon can be a troublesome punctuation mark because it has several different functions, nearly all of which are functions shared by other punctuation marks. For this reason, it is usually a good idea to use semicolons sparingly in your writing and use the more common full-stop period in all other cases. **Note:** the semicolon does NOT make your writing seem more sophisticated, so do not use it only for this purpose. Instead, be certain that you understand when it should be used.

**When to Use the Semicolon:**

The semicolon is often used to separate two main clauses, much like a period:

**Ex. The concert was brilliant; the crowd gave the band a standing ovation.**

In this example, a period would have worked just as well, but the semicolon suggests a close relationship (in this case a causal relationship) between the *ideas* of the two sentences. Here, we are to understand that the crowd applauded the band *because* the concert was brilliant.

**Note:** You cannot use a comma for this same purpose. Whenever you separate two independent clauses with only a comma, you have committed an error called a **comma splice**:

**Ex. The concert was brilliant, the crowd gave the band a standing ovation.**

The semicolon can be used to separate two main clauses joined by transitional phrases (*on the other hand, as a result, for example*) or by conjunctive adverbs (*however, hence, thus, therefore*):

**Ex. The Congress voted in favor of the Highway Safety Act; however, the President vetoed the new bill.**

Again, a comma cannot be used in place of the semicolon:

**Ex. The Congress voted in favor of the Highway Safety Act, however the President vetoed the new bill.**

Joining words like “however” can be used after commas, but only when they appear between nouns and their verbs:

**Ex. The Congress voted in favor of the Highway Safety Act. The President, however, vetoed the new bill.**

**Note:** Also be sure that you do not write **sentence fragments** after semicolons. This problem is especially common with the transitional phrase “for example”:

**Ex. The electric car prototype has many features; for example, good handling and acceleration.**
To correct this problem, you must include a subject and verb before “good handling and acceleration”:

**Ex.** The electric car prototype has many features; for example, it has good handling and acceleration.

The semicolon’s best use is when separating a series of items on a list, and at least one of the items on that list contains a comma:

**Ex.** The following crewmembers were on the bridge: James T. Kirk, captain of the Enterprise; Mr. Spock, science officer; Mr. Sulu, helmsman; Ms. Uhura, communications officer; and Dr. McCoy, chief medical officer.

**Note:** Each person on this list is identified by name and then job title, but there are five people in total, rather than ten.

**When NOT to Use the Semicolon:**

Paying special attention to the heading of this section and the beginning of the sentence in the previous example, notice that you should NOT use a semicolon to reveal information. This is the job of the colon (:).

**Ex.** I am dedicated to one goal; curing cancer.

**Correct Ex.** I am dedicated to one goal: curing cancer.

**Practice Exercise**

1) When the professor came down the hall, the students hid in the stairwell they didn’t want to be seen.
2) The celebration was cancelled however it was re-scheduled for the following week.
3) The meal consisted of the following: a garden salad with Italian dressing, a baked potato with sour cream and chives, New York striploin steak, cooked to perfection, steamed carrots, broccoli, and cauliflower, and blueberry cheesecake for dessert.
4) Sid and Nancy just bought a new car consequently Nancy looked for a new job.

**Answers**

1) When the professor came down the hall, the students hid in the stairwell; they didn’t want to be seen.
2) The celebration was cancelled; however it was re-scheduled for the following week.
3) The meal consisted of the following: a garden salad with Italian dressing; a baked potato with sour cream and chives; New York striploin steak, cooked to perfection; steamed carrots, broccoli, and cauliflower; and blueberry cheesecake for dessert.
4) Sid and Nancy just bought a new car; consequently Nancy looked for a new job.