



Using the Semicolon

The semicolon (;) is used in several ways:

1. To join independent clauses* whose meanings are closely related in thought, whether through *opposition* or *apposition*.

- OPPOSITION:

“She was willing to compromise; you were not.”

- Because these two clauses illustrate the dramatic difference between “she” and “you”, they can be said to be in *opposition*; however, they are still closely related in meaning.

- APPPOSITION:

“The last day of summer vacation finally arrived; reluctantly we prepared for the first day of the new school year.”

- These two clauses are in *apposition* because they illustrate the close connection between the two events; in this way, they are closely related in meaning.

*If you are going to use a semicolon, you need to make sure that the independent clauses you are connecting are *not* joined by a FANBOY (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet*).

Incorrect: She was an uptown girl; but he was from the lower east side.

Correct: She was an uptown girl; he was from the lower east side.

2. To join independent clauses joined by the following words:

accordingly, also, besides, consequently, furthermore, hence, however, indeed, instead, moreover, nevertheless, otherwise, similarly, still, therefore, thus, for example, for instance, that is, in fact.

- Trevor studied for four months for his organic chemistry final; **consequently**, he earned a very high grade in the class.
- The semicolon is often misunderstood; **therefore**, people often avoid using it.

3. To separate items in a series if the items contain commas:

- During our spring break road-trip, we stopped in Santa Barbara, California; Reno, Nevada; Denver, Colorado; and Boise, Idaho.
- Sarah’s favorite animals are horses, which she enjoys riding every once in a while; dogs, which always bring her happiness no matter what’s going on in life; and turtles, which she likes to watch crawling along at the bottom of the aquarium.

4. A semicolon may be used instead of a comma in order to separate independent clauses if there are commas within the clauses.

*This is the only time a writer may break the FANBOY rule (see * above).*

- In the seventeenth century, the era of such distinguished prose writers as Sir Thomas Browne, John Donne, and Jeremy Taylor, the balanced compound sentence using commas and semicolons reached popularity; but the tendency of many writers today is to use a fast-moving style with shorter sentences and fewer commas and semicolons.