

HOW TO USE SEMICOLONS

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OK, so what is a semicolon anyway?

The semicolon (;) is a form of punctuation which indicates a pause between two main clauses. It's more pronounced than a comma (,) but weaker than a period (.). Basically, it helps you connect two very closely related ideas when you need something stronger than a comma for the glue. Using a semicolon properly can make your work feel more sophisticated and "elevated."

But what ideas, exactly?

These ideas can take several forms, as listed below.

- You can use a semicolon to link two independent clauses (a subject and predicate that can stand on its own). To wit:

My neighbor planted squash in her garden this year; she always has such good luck with that vegetable.

In the example above, you could just as easily write the sentence in two different, but equally simple, ways:

My neighbor planted squash in her garden this year, and she always has such good luck with that vegetable. OR:

My neighbor planted squash in her garden this year. She always has such good luck with that vegetable.

In this case, the purpose of the semicolon is simply to link and bring some formality and sophistication to the two closely related clauses. Keep in mind, however, that the clauses must be very closely related. Simply using a semicolon in place of a period or comma does not mean the clauses are related, as in this incorrect example:

My neighbor planted squash in her garden this year; I'm jealous of her gardening skills.

Note the clauses above are not directly related and would benefit from a period between them. In a pinch, remember this rule of thumb: If the sentence needs something stronger than a comma, but not as strong as a period, then it's possible what it really needs is a semicolon.

- You can use a semicolon to link clauses connected by a conjunctive adverb (*also, however, consequently*, plus many others).

I planted my tomatoes in April; however, an early spring frost killed almost all of them.

- You can use a semicolon to link clauses connected by transitional phrases (in addition, on the other hand, that is to say, plus many more).

I planted my tomatoes in April; that is to say, I tried to get a leg up on my planting this year.

- You can use a semicolon in lists of items to avoid the confusion that might result from using a comma.

I planted tomatoes in the first row; squash, string beans, and peppers in the second row; cucumbers and pumpkins in the third row; and strawberries and blueberries in the fourth row.

Note in the (rather extreme) example above that without the semicolons, the sentence will be an unreadable mess of commas.

- You can use a semicolon to link long clauses and clauses with commas to avoid confusion.

I planted tomatoes, squash, string beans, peppers, cucumbers, pumpkins, strawberries and blueberries; but I still have room, so I'm thinking of planting eggplant, as well.

But I'm writing fiction, not a laundry list of my gardening goals!

OK, now for some real-world usage, as in this example from one of my books. In this case, *A Clockwork Vampire*. Let's look at the paragraph as a whole where the semicolon appears:

Robert stiffened in response and Edwin counted it a small victory. He knew Robert and Juliana had been considering converting her to a nonhuman state for some time now. If Juliana became a were-leopard like Robert, they might be able to conceive. It was a sensitive

subject for Eliza; even if she became a vampire someday, she and Edwin could never conceive.

The above example is correct because the last sentence is constructed of two independent clauses. To wit:

It was a sensitive subject for Eliza; even if she became a vampire someday, she and Edwin could never conceive.

Let's break the clauses down into two independent sentences so you can see:

It was a sensitive subject for Eliza. Even if she became a vampire someday, she and Edwin could never conceive.

The clauses stand on their own; therefore, a semicolon may be used—if I want to use it. In this example, my semicolon usage is optional. I don't have to include it, and, in many cases of fictional work, I would suggest using them sparingly as they bring a stiff formality to your writing, which may (or may not) be what you are going for. This is a case where voice is as important as proper grammatical use, but we'll discuss voice some other time.

Now let's look at some of the errors I encounter, using the same sentences above a little differently.

Incorrect: If Juliana became a were-leopard like Robert; they might be able to conceive.

The first clause cannot stand on its own. Therefore, it cannot be linked to the second with a semicolon.

Incorrect: Robert stiffened in response; Edwin counted it a small victory.

The two clauses above, though capable of standing on their own, are not very closely related, and each has a different subject (Robert and Edwin, respectively). If I was editing this sentence, I would either divide it with a period or add a conjunction (as in the original example, which is what I went with).

Incorrect: He knew Robert and Juliana had been considering converting her to a nonhuman state for some time now, if Juliana became a were-leopard like Robert, they might be able to conceive.

In the above example, a semicolon could easily fix the glaring error, a run-on sentence. To wit:

He knew Robert and Juliana had been considering converting her to a nonhuman state for some time now; that is to say, if Juliana became a were-leopard like Robert, they might be able to conceive.

Note that, again, voice (and this time, style) also come into play. For example, even though the above sentence is grammatically correct, I would still edit it for sheer clunkiness and length, taking us back to the original example: **He knew Robert and Juliana had been considering converting her to a nonhuman state for some time now. If Juliana became a were-leopard like Robert, they might be able to conceive.**

In conclusion:

To help yourself, just remember that a semicolon is stronger than a comma but weaker than a period. I hope this tutorial was useful.

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