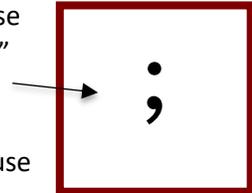


How to use a semicolon

The semi-colon is a helpful punctuation mark—but only if you know for sure how to use it! The fact is, semi-colons should be used sparingly. They have only two uses; see below for details. (*See how we used one in that sentence? That’s an example of use 1—see below!*)

What is a semi-colon? First of all— which one is the semi-colon? (Don’t confuse it with a *colon*.) A semi-colon is the one people used to use to make a “winky face” in old-style emoticons. It looks like a comma with a dot above it:



The two uses of semi-colons: Believe it or not, there are only two ways to use a semicolon.

1. The most common use of the semi-colon is **to separate closely related independent clauses in a sentence.**

Environmental issues associated with global climate change affect nearly every area of the United States; all states and most municipalities will face the challenge of mitigating climate change effects.

No one has taken responsibility for the maintenance problem; further investigation is ongoing.

For a semi-colon to be effectively used, the information or ideas in the clauses “on either side” of it must be very closely related. The semicolon “replaces” what might otherwise connect the clauses:

Environmental issues associated with global climate change affect nearly every area of the United States, **and** all states and most municipalities will face the challenge of mitigating climate change effects.

Environmental issues associated with global climate change affect nearly every area of the United States; all states and most municipalities will face the challenge of mitigating climate change effects.

No one has taken responsibility for the maintenance problem, **but** further investigation is ongoing.

No one has taken responsibility for the maintenance problem, **and so** further investigation is ongoing.

No one has taken responsibility for the maintenance problem; further investigation is ongoing.

The committee had no intention of revealing the information in a public statement. **Instead,** their plan was to leak it to the press through “backdoor channels.”

The committee had no intention of revealing the information in a public statement; their plan was to leak it to the press through “backdoor channels.”

Caution: Remember that a clause is independent even if it begins with a **conjunctive adverb***, such as moreover, however, nevertheless, etc. Use a semi-colon if the second independent clause begins with a conjunctive adverb, or choose another way to separate the clauses; otherwise, it’s a comma splice!

The sessions lasted well into the autumn; **frequently,** they lasted all night.

Most concerns raised by the students were acknowledged by the legislators; **however,** no action has been taken to actually address any of the concerns.

2. The second use of the semicolon is to separate items in a list if one or more of the list items includes a comma.

You doubt know that items in a list are typically separated with a comma; this is referred to as a **serial comma**.

Before the product can be greenlighted, the company must devise the schematic, procure funding, and create a sales plan.

It’s easy to see the “list” if the sentence is formatted like this:

Before the product can be greenlighted, the company must

- ¹ devise the schematic,
- ² procure funding,
- and
- ³ create a sales plan.

BUT, if one or more items in the list includes a comma, a semicolon is used to separate the “items.” In this example, items 2 and 4 include commas:

Product managers

- ¹ guide the development of a company’s product or feature;
- ² serve as liaison between business, technology, and design teams;
- ³ lead cross-functional initiatives;
- and
- ⁴ manage tasks, tools, relationships in every phase of product development.

Product managers guide the development of a company’s product or feature; serve as liaison between business, technology, and design teams; lead cross-functional initiatives; and manage tasks, tools, relationships in every phase of product development.

***A very partial list of conjunctive adverbs:** *anyway, besides, consequently, finally, furthermore, however, likewise, meanwhile, moreover, nevertheless, similarly, therefore—and many more!*