

Airs and Graces: The Semicolon.

Look at your friendly neighborhood semicolon. What do you see? If you look closely, the semicolon looks like a comma with a period above it. This can be a good way to remember the semicolon's function. Simply, a semicolon creates more separation between thoughts than a comma, but is less final than a period. Here are the two most common uses of the semicolon:

1. To help separate items in a list, when some of those items already contain commas.

Suppose you want to list three items that you bought at the grocery store:

apples
grapes
pears

In a sentence, you would separate these items with commas:

I bought apples, grapes, and pears.

Now suppose that the three items you want to list are described in phrases that already contain some commas:

shiny, ripe apples
small, sweet, juicy grapes
firm pears

If you use commas to separate these items, the sentence looks like this:

I bought shiny, ripe apples, small, sweet, juicy grapes, and firm pears.

That middle part is a bit confusing—it doesn't give the reader many visual cues about how many items are in the list, or about which words should be grouped together. Here is where the semi-colon can help. The commas between items can be "bumped up" a notch and turned into semicolons, so that readers can easily tell how many items are in the list and which words go together:

I bought shiny, ripe apples; small, sweet, juicy grapes; and firm pears.

2. To join two sentences.

An independent clause is a group of words that can stand on its own (independently)—a complete sentence. Semicolons can be used between two independent clauses. The semicolon keeps the clauses somewhat separate, like a period would do, so we can easily tell which ideas belong to which clause. It also suggests that there may be a close relationship between the two clauses—closer than you would expect if there were a period between them. Here are a few examples.

I went to the grocery store today. I bought a ton of fruit. Apples, grapes, and pears were on sale.

Now—where could semicolons fit in here? They could be used to join two (but not all three) of the independent clauses together. So either of these pairs of sentences would be correct:

CORRECT:

I went to the grocery store today; I bought many varieties of fruit. Apples, grapes, and pears were all on sale.

OR

I went to the grocery store today. I bought many varieties of fruit; apples, grapes, and pears were all on sale.

INCORRECT:

I went to the grocery store today; I bought a ton of fruit; apples, grapes, and pears were all on sale.

Why use a semicolon here, anyway? One reason might be to aid the smoothness of your writing style: the three short sentences sound kind of choppy or abrupt. A stronger reason might be to emphasize a relationship between two of the sentences. By connecting “I bought many varieties of fruit” and “Apples, grapes, and pears were all on sale” more closely, readers may realize that the reason why I bought so much fruit was the great sale.