

Semicolons

It's no accident that a **semicolon** is a period atop a comma. Like commas, semicolons indicate an audible pause—slightly longer than a comma's, but short of a period's full stop.

Semicolons have other functions, too. But first, a caveat: avoid the common mistake of using a semicolon to replace a colon (see [Colons](#)).

Incorrect: *I have one goal; to find her.*

Correct: *I have one goal: to find her.*

Rule 1a. A semicolon can replace a period if the writer wishes to narrow the gap between two closely linked sentences.

Examples:

Call me tomorrow; you can give me an answer then.

We have paid our dues; we expect all the privileges listed in the contract.

Rule 1b. Avoid a semicolon when a dependent clause comes before an independent clause.

Incorrect: *Although they tried; they failed.*

Correct: *Although they tried, they failed.*

Rule 2. Use a semicolon before such words and terms as *namely*, *however*, *therefore*, *that is*, *i.e.*, *for example*, *e.g.*, *for instance*, etc., when they introduce a complete sentence. It is also preferable to use a comma after these words and terms.

Example: *Bring any two items; however, sleeping bags and tents are in short supply.*

Rule 3. Use a semicolon to separate units of a series when one or more of the units contain commas.

Incorrect: *The conference has people who have come from Moscow, Idaho, Springfield, California, Alamo, Tennessee, and other places as well.*

Note that with only commas, that sentence is hopeless.

Correct: *The conference has people who have come from Moscow, Idaho; Springfield, California; Alamo, Tennessee; and other places as well.* (Note the final semicolon, rather than a comma, after *Tennessee*.)

Rule 4. A semicolon may be used between independent clauses joined by a connector, such as *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, etc., when one or more commas appear in the first clause.

Example: *When I finish here, and I will soon, I'll be glad to help you; and that is a promise I will keep.*

Rule 5. Do not capitalize ordinary words after a semicolon.

Incorrect: *I am here; You are over there.*

Correct: *I am here; you are over there.*