# Semicolons

# What is a semicolon?

A semicolon is a punctuation mark used to link related sentences. Most often, independent clauses are joined by a comma and a coordinating conjunction (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet,* or *so*); a semicolon, however, functions like a period but suggests a relationship between two closely linked independent clauses. A semicolon is also used to separate items in a complex list that contains internal punctuation.

# When should a semicolon be used?

* Are the two sentences connected in meaning, such as through a cause/effect or compare/contrast relationship?
* Are the two independent clauses about the same subject?
* Would a transitional word or phrase show the relationship between the two independent clauses better than a coordinating conjunction?
* Is there a list of items which requires a dependent clause, definition, clarification, or example?

# Examples of proper semicolon use:

*The big game is on Saturday; it’s at eight in the evening.* 🗸

(**independent clause**) (**independent clause**)

These independent clauses can easily stand on their own, but the writer deliberately used a semicolon to connect them, showing they are related sentences.

*Our team is the home team; however, the rival team refused to wear their away colors.* (**independent clause**) (**transition**) (**independent clause**)

These independent clauses could have been understood as individual sentences, but the writer shows their connection better with the use of a semicolon and the transitional word, “however.”

*We had games in Victorville, California; Tucson, Arizona; and Atlanta, Georgia.* 🗸

(**item 1**) (**item 2**) (**item 3**)

Above is a complex list of cities and their states which is more clearly represented with semicolons, as opposed to this grammatical headache:

*We had games in Victorville, California, Tucson, Arizona, and Atlanta, Georgia.* ⮾

(**item 1**) (**item 2**) (**item 3**)

**Examples of improper use:**

*The big game is on Saturday; in the evening.* ⮾

(**independent clause**) (**dependent clause**)

This is incorrect because only one of the ideas separated by the semicolon is a complete sentence. A semicolon can only be used when the two ideas are independent clauses.

Our team is the home team; but the rival team refused to wear their away colors.

(**independent clause**) (**conj.**) (**independent clause**)

These independent clauses have been improperly joined with a semicolon and a coordinating conjunction. A comma is the appropriate punctuation to use before the conjunction to join these complete sentences.

*We had games in Victorville; Tucson; and Atlanta.* ⮾

(**item 1**) (**item 2**) (**item 3**)

The list above should be separated by commas as there is no other usage of punctuation within the individual list items.

# Exercises

**Use semicolons in the appropriate position if one is needed. Mark over existing punctuation.**

1. My family is going to Big Bear on vacation. We packed a lot of cold weather clothing.
2. All of my friends are going to the concert tonight, and I’m going to stay home and do homework.
3. Our whole school sold chocolate bars to raise money, afterwards, we’ll build a new gym.
4. William Shakespeare wrote many plays including *Julius Caesar*, a tragedy, *Richard III*, a history, and *The Tempest*, a comedy.
5. My favorite band is going on tour, but the three venues closest to me are in Los Angeles, California, Anaheim, California, and Las Vegas, Nevada.