

## Chapter 21

# Semicolons and Colons

### SEMICOLONS

A semicolon looks like what it is: part period and part comma. It says to the reader, “Stop here a little longer than you stop for a comma but not so long as you stop for a period.”

Semicolons are used primarily in compound sentences. Since most writers depend largely upon simple and complex sentences to express their ideas, the semicolon is not often used. As you study the rules in this chapter regarding semicolons, follow the lead of professional writers; use the semicolon correctly and effectively but sparingly.

### 21a. Use a semicolon between independent clauses in a sentence if they are not joined by *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *for*, *yet*.

Notice in the following pairs of sentences that the semicolon takes the place of the comma and the conjunction joining the independent clauses.

#### EXAMPLES

First I washed the dishes and swept the kitchen, **and** then I went to the grocery store.

First I washed the dishes and swept the kitchen; then I went to the grocery store.

Lillian enjoys reading detective stories, **but** her brother prefers science fiction.

Lillian enjoys reading detective stories; her brother prefers science fiction.

Similarly, a semicolon can take the place of a period between two complete thoughts (independent clauses) that are closely related.

#### EXAMPLE

Wilma listened attentively to the joke. Her half smile gradually changed into an ear-to-ear grin. [two simple sentences]

Wilma listened attentively to the joke; her half smile gradually changed into an ear-to-ear grin.

As you study the sentences below (taken from the works of professional writers), observe that each semicolon has a complete thought on *both* sides of it and that the two independent clauses are not joined by *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *for*,

or *yet*. Since the thoughts of the independent clauses in each sentence are very closely related, a semicolon is better than a period.

**EXAMPLES**

The clock was stopped with two seconds remaining in the game; the fans were tensed and sitting on the edge of their seats.

In one city a fur dealer was giving merchandise certificates as prizes in a radio contest; in another a sewing machine distributor gave credit certificates to winners (and losers) of contest promotions.

A huge tie results; to break the tie entrants must pay another, often higher, fee and solve more difficult puzzles.

**EXERCISE 1.** Read the following sentences and decide where semicolons may be used. Copy on your paper the following: (1) the word before each semicolon, (2) the semicolon itself, and (3) the word that comes after it. In some instances, you may prefer to use a period. If so, write the word before the period, the period itself, and the word (capitalized) following the period ..

EXAMPLES 1. Great earthquakes usually begin gently only one or two slight shocks move the earth.

1. *gently; only*

2. In minutes, however, violent shocks begin to tear the earth apart there are few natural forces as destructive as earthquakes.

2. *apart. There*

1. Pressure often builds along faults, or cracks, in the earth's crust the weight of this pressure causes earthquakes.
2. The San Andreas fault extends the entire length of California earthquakes often occur along this fault.
3. During an earthquake, huge chunks of the earth's crust begin to move the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 was one of the most destructive earthquakes recorded in history.
4. Energy released during an earthquake is tremendous it can equal the explosive force of 180 metric tons of TNT.
5. Scientists study the force of earthquakes they measure this force on a scale of numbers called the Richter scale.
6. An earthquake measuring less than 5 on the Richter scale is not serious more than 1000 earthquakes measuring 2 or less occur daily.

7. In 1906 one of the most powerful earthquakes in history occurred in the Pacific Ocean near Ecuador its Richter measurement was 8.9.
8. Tidal waves are a dangerous result of earthquakes geologists use the Japanese word *tsunami* for these destructive waves.
9. Predicting when earthquakes will take place is not yet possible predicting where they take place is somewhat more certain.
10. Earthquakes seem to strike in a regular time sequence in California, for example, a major earthquake usually occurs every 50-100 years.

**21b. Use a semicolon between independent clauses joined by such words as for example, for instance, that is, besides, accordingly, moreover, nevertheless, furthermore, otherwise, therefore, however, consequently, instead, hence.**

These words are often transitional expressions linking independent clauses. When used in this way, they are preceded by a semicolon, not a comma. They are, however, usually followed by a comma.

**INCORRECT** Janet did as she was told, however, she grumbled ungraciously.

**CORRECT** Janet did as she was told; however, she grumbled ungraciously.

**INCORRECT** I did not go to the movies, instead, I worked on my project.

**CORRECT** I did not go to the movies; instead, I worked on my project.

*Caution:* When the expressions listed in the rule appear *within* a clause, not as a transition *between* clauses, they are usually punctuated as interrupters (set off by commas). The two clauses are still separated by a semicolon: *We are going ahead with plans for the picnic; everyone, however, will not attend.*

**21c. A semicolon (rather than a comma) may be needed to separate the independent clauses of a compound sentence if there are commas within the clauses.**

This use of the semicolon often helps to make a sentence clear.

**CONFUSING** She will invite Irene, Beth, and Eunice, and Graham will ask Leslie and Val.

**CLEAR** She will invite Irene, Beth, and Eunice; and Graham will ask Leslie and Val.

**CONFUSING** After the fire, Lionel stood in the middle of the lot, now covered with charred debris, and, not tired and discouraged, he began to scrape through the ashes as if he were trying to uncover something of value.

**CLEAR** After the fire, Lionel stood in the middle of the lot, now covered with charred debris; and, not tired and discouraged, he began to scrape through the ashes as if he were trying to uncover something of value.

**EXERCISE 2.** Follow the directions for Exercise 1 as you show where to use semicolons in the following sentences.

1. Traveling through the countryside last summer, we decided not to follow any schedule, for example, we took side roads if we found any that looked interesting.
2. One quiet road, many miles from the main highway, wound narrowly through the hills, at times it seemed to disappear altogether under the bushes growing along it.
3. As Dad steered the car carefully, the conversation that Mother and I had been having died out, impressed by the stillness of our surroundings, we became strangely silent.
4. There were no houses nearby, but, seeing the remains of a few old rock chimneys, we knew that someone must have lived here many years ago.
5. After traveling about ten miles along this road, we noticed a small, square area fenced around with iron rails, inside the fence, all overgrown with grass and wildflowers, were old graves.
6. A few of the graves, dating back to the early 1800's, had crude stone monuments with traces of names that the elements had not yet scratched out, but others, having only two stones marking the site, had no names.
7. As we looked at the little cemetery, we wondered what stories these people could have told about early settlements, about the hardships of pioneers, or about the terrors of the wilderness, perhaps they had lived through wars, epidemics, and blizzards.
8. A famine, according to our history books, had struck this lonely area, therefore, we assumed that some of these people had died during a time of severe food shortage.
9. We continued to stand there for some time, each of us deep in thought, finally we walked slowly back to the car.
10. On the way back to the highway, we continued to be very quiet,

furthermore, each of us seemed relieved when we finally drove into a bright, lively town.

**21d. Use a semicolon between items in a series if the items contain commas.**

**EXAMPLES**

The examinations will be held on Wednesday, June 26; Thursday, June 27; and Friday, June 28.

There were two representatives from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; four from Buffalo, New York; and three from Cleveland, Ohio.

**EXERCISE 3.** All of the following sentences contain items in a series. If the items should be separated by semicolons, copy the sentence, adding the needed semicolons. If a sentence needs no semicolons, write *C* (for *correct*) after the corresponding sentence number on your paper.

1. In the sixteenth century there were centers of learning in France, Italy, and Germany.
2. Western culture was enriched by centers of learning in Paris, France, Rome, Italy, and Mainz, Germany.
3. The Aztecs in Mexico had constructed dams to irrigate cornfields, had made mirrors and razors out of stone, and had devised effective war weapons.
4. The Incas in Peru planted crops, such as com, domesticated animals, such as the llama, and developed crafts, such as weaving.
5. Mrs. Healy discussed the importance of people like Gutenberg, inventor of movable type, Galileo, inventor of the first complete astronomical telescope, and Newton, discoverer of the laws of gravity.

**REVIEW EXERCISE A.** Read the following sentences and decide where semicolons should be used. Do not copy the sentences. Instead, write on your paper the sentence number; after it, copy the word preceding the needed semicolon, write the semicolon, and then copy the word following the semicolon. If a sentence needs no semicolon, write *C* (for *correct*) after the appropriate number on your paper. (*Caution:* Remember that when a semicolon and quotation marks come together, the semicolon goes *outside* the quotation marks.)

**EXAMPLE**

1. Unfortunately, many superstitions are not dead they survive in our conversations and sometimes influence our

behavior.

1. *dead; they*

1. Our conversations frequently mirror old superstitions we “interpret” ordinary events strangely and illogically almost every day.
2. Generally speaking, these interpretations are virtual synonyms for events for example, *my burning ears* means “somebody is talking about me.”
3. Other examples include *Friday 13*, “an unlucky day,” *open umbrellas indoors*, “bad luck,” and *gifts of knives*, “cut or severed friendships.”
4. Many customs have their roots in superstitions for instance, when you cover your yawns with your hand, you are not only being polite but also paying respect to superstition.
5. People used to think that horned devils sat in trees or on high buildings and passed the time of day by shooting poisoned arrows into the hearts of unfortunate persons walking below.
6. Since the air seemed to be infested with hordes of devils, many people believed that these imps would seize every opportunity to enter the body and corrupt the person’s soul.
7. To yawn was to create the opening that the devils were seeking people who covered the yawn with their left hand could stop the invisible invaders from entering their bodies.
8. When someone sneezes in our presence, we often say “Bless you” very quickly this custom is also based upon ancient lore about devils.
9. Although a sneeze is no more than a noisy spray of moisture, it seems to call for a special and an immediate blessing.
10. Long ago it was believed that demons were continually trying to put spells on people however, when a person sneezed, the curse was shaken off and thus the person deserved a blessing.
11. My friend Gloria often brags about something like never missing a word on a spelling test nevertheless, she then suddenly freezes with fearful anticipation of failure and adds quickly, “Knock on wood.”
12. In order to be sure that she will make a perfect score on the next test, Gloria finds a piece of wood and knocks on it vigorously I do the same thing.
13. This custom hinges on an old idea that demons lived in trees and that they would occasionally help by bringing a person good luck.
14. As Shakespeare’s Iago tells us in plain language, devils have to *appear* good at times otherwise they could not lure people away from goodness.
15. These tree-dwelling devils were not fools they knew how to use “good

luck” for their own evil purposes.

16. They also expected people to perform certain rituals one of these was a kind of thanksgiving ceremony.
17. A person enjoying a run of good fortune was obligated to show gratitude by knocking on a tree the devils living inside the tree not only heard the thank-you knocks but also extended the period of good luck.
18. After people had moved from the country to large cities, no tree was convenient therefore, any piece of wood became an appropriate substitute.
19. The superstitious fear of walking under a ladder is more sensible a ladder could fall and injure you.
20. I imagine that our grandchildren will go on knocking on wood, blessing a person who sneezes, and covering their yawning mouths but these customs are rather foolish actions for people living in an enlightened age.

**REVIEW EXERCISE B.** Using semicolons and commas where appropriate, write two sentences of your own (ten sentences in all) to illustrate each of the following patterns of punctuation.

1. **PATTERN** An independent clause; an independent clause.  
**EXAMPLE** Glenda made a basket just before the final buzzer of the game; we won by a score of 78 to 76.
2. **PATTERN** Independent clause, coordinating conjunction, independent clause.  
**EXAMPLE** Glenda made a basket just before the final buzzer of the game, and we won by a score of 78 to 76.
3. **PATTERN** Introductory element, independent clause; independent clause.  
**EXAMPLE** Just before the final buzzer of the game, Glenda made a basket; we won by 78 to 76.
4. **PATTERN** Independent clause; transitional word, independent clause.  
**EXAMPLE** The score was tied for the last three minutes of the quarter; however, Glenda made a basket just before the buzzer.
5. **PATTERN** Independent clause with commas; coordinating conjunction, independent clause.  
**EXAMPLE** Oscar is bringing ham sandwiches, potato salad, and deviled eggs; and I am baking cookies and making lemonade.

## COLONS

Generally, the colon is used to call the reader’s attention to what comes next.

## 21e. Use a colon to mean “note what follows.”

(1) Use a colon before a list of items, especially after expressions like *as follows* and *the following*.

**EXAMPLES**      The equipment that you will need is as follows: a light jacket, heavy boots, a rifle, several cartons of shells, and a sharp hunting knife.

That summer we traveled through the following states: Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia.

The principal’s desk was cluttered with all kinds of papers: unopened letters, absence reports, telephone messages, and unpaid bills.

I have three hobbies: sewing, cooking, and painting.

In the last two examples, the items before which the colon is used are appositives. If a word has a list of appositives following it, the colon is used to make the sentence clear.

<p>• <b>NOTE</b> When a list follows immediately after a verb or preposition, do not use a colon.</p>
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**INCORRECT**      My three hobbies are: sewing, cooking, and painting.

**CORRECT**      My three hobbies are sewing, cooking, and painting.

**INCORRECT**      That summer we traveled through: Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia.

**CORRECT**      That summer we traveled through Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia.

(2) Use a colon before a long, formal statement or quotation.

**EXAMPLE** Horace Mann had this to say about dealing with those who disagree with you: “Do not think of knocking out another person’s brains because he differs in opinion from you. It would be as rational to knock yourself on the head because you differ from yourself ten years ago.”

## 21f. Use a colon in certain conventional situations.

(1) Use a colon between the hour and the minute when you write the time.



**EXAMPLES**      7:30 A.M.      3:15 P.M.

(2) Use a colon between chapter and verse in referring to passages from the Bible.

**EXAMPLES**      Genesis 27:28    Ruth 1:16

(3) Use a colon after the salutation of a business letter.

**EXAMPLES**      Dear Sir:              Dear Mrs. Roberts:  
                         Gentlemen:          Dear Professor Stanton:

**EXERCISE 4.** Number your paper 1-10. Decide where colons should appear in the following sentences. If a sentence does not need a colon, write *C* (for *correct*) after its number. If a colon is required after a word, copy the word and write a colon after it. If a colon is needed to divide numbers, copy the numbers and add the needed colon.

**EXAMPLE**      1. At 9 01 A.M., Miss Blake wrote on the board this line from Kipling's speech "Words are the most- powerful drug used by humanity."

1. 9:01  
*speech:*

1. Reading Proverbs 3 13, the minister supported his main point with the following quotation "Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding."
2. In science class we have to learn the meaning of the following words *amphibian*, *chromosome*, *neutron*, *oxidation*, and *vertebrate*.
3. Ms. Thompson invited Meredith, Natalie, and Samantha.
4. The farmer explained the uses of the various parts of the plow landslide, clevis, jointer, and beam.
5. Experts can identify a fingerprint by observing the nature of the following arches, whorls, loops, and composites.
6. At 10 45 the teacher closed the lesson by reading Exodus 20 12 "Honor thy father and thy .mother, that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee."
7. At 8 20 the agent told us that the 6 1 0 train would not arrive before 9 15 P.M.
8. Along the midway were several kinds of rides a roller coaster, a whip, two merry-go-rounds, and a Ferris wheel.
9. There were sandwiches, cold drinks, and candy on our television tables.

10. At an airport I like to listen to the many noises engines roaring during takeoff, loudspeakers announcing departures and arrivals, passengers dropping quarters into insurance machines, telephones ringing at every counter, and skycaps greeting incoming passengers.

**REVIEW EXERCISE C.** Using commas, semicolons, and colons, copy and correctly punctuate the following sentences.

1. A scrawny friendly stray dog wandered out onto the field and the umpire stopped the game temporarily.
2. Because they do not conduct electricity the following materials can be used as insulators rubber ‘ glass cloth and plastics.
3. There are only three primary colors in painting red blue and yellow.
4. Other colors are mixtures of primary colors for instance purple is a mixture of red and blue.
5. The ten-gallon hat of the cowboy was used as a protection from the sun a dipper for water and a pan for washing his hands and leather chaps protected him from thorny bushes.
6. The minister began the sermon by quoting these verses from the Bible Matthew 23 37 and John 1627.
7. In his speech to the Sock and Buskin our dramatic club Mr. Henry Stevenson Jr. quoted from several Shakespearean plays *Romeo and Juliet* *The Tempest* *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*.
8. Harriet Tubman was a leader of the Underground Railway she rescued more than 300 slaves.
9. From 1851 to 1864 the United States had four presidents Millard Fillmore a Whig from New York Franklin Pierce a Democrat from New Hampshire James Buchanan a Democrat from Pennsylvania and Abraham Lincoln a Republican from Illinois.
10. From 1 15 to 1 50 P.M. I was so sleepy that my mind wandered completely tuning out the lesson I rested my head on my right palm and let my eyelids sag to half-mast.