

## THE SEMICOLON

---

The semicolon can be a very confusing mark of punctuation. It's often incorrectly used, and many will avoid it altogether because they're unsure of how to use it properly.

The semicolon has also been the subject of controversy. Many consider its correct use to be the mark of a well-educated individual, while others consider it a sign of snobbery. It's rarely ever absolutely necessary, and if we threw the semicolon out of the grammar books altogether, we could still form sentences and have proper grammar.

But that's essentially what makes it so special. It's a wonderful little tool that, when used correctly, can enhance our writing and the way our audience understands it.

It's actually very simple:

FULL SENTENCE (IC); FULL SENTENCE (IC)

The semicolon is used when indicating a **close relationship** between two complete sentences (independent clauses). A period could be used, but the writer does not want the connection to be broken abruptly by the use of a full stop.

- Both what precedes and what follows a semicolon **must** be complete sentences that can stand alone.
- The semicolon binds those independent clauses more closely than they would be if separated by a period.
- The semicolon often replaces a conjunction such as *and* or *but*.

Examples:

- I like to go to the CNE in September; I wait all year to eat a deep-fried Mars bar.
- Abdul goes to the emergency room all the time; the healthcare workers know them by name.
- I'm too tired; I can't stay awake any longer.
- Ibrahim drives a Tesla; Amina drives a Civic.



Content in this document was created by Math & Writing Centre tutors with the support of Student Learning Services and the Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Humber College.



## Conjunctive Adverbs

You can also use a semicolon when you join two independent clauses together with a conjunctive adverb, e.g. *however, moreover, therefore, consequently, otherwise, nevertheless, thus*.

### Examples:

- I don't like onions; however, I don't taste them in this soup.
- Because Bibi was sick, they missed a lot of classes; consequently, they failed the course.
- Arman was afraid that they might use a semicolon incorrectly; therefore, they avoided using them altogether.

**Remember:** semicolons may *not* be used with a **coordinating conjunction**, which must be preceded by a **comma** when joining two sentences. Coordinating conjunctions include: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.* (FANBOYS)

## Semicolons in Lists

The semicolon is also less frequently used as a divisor to make meaning clear in a sentence where commas are being used for other purposes. A common example of this use is to separate the items of a list when some of the items themselves contain internal commas.

**A:** *Since I've been living in Canada, I've visited Hamilton, Niagara Falls, Algonquin Park, north of Toronto in cottage country, Montreal, Quebec, and Quebec City.*

How many places have I been?

We are lost in a sea of commas! In this case, we will use the semicolon to separate the items in the list. The semicolon will clean the commas up, bring order to the sentence, and make things clear.

**B:** *Since I've been living in Canada, I've visited Hamilton; Niagara Falls; Algonquin Park, north of Toronto in cottage country; Montreal, Quebec; and Quebec City.*

Now how many places have I been?

## Extra Notes

- Be careful not to use semicolons excessively. They can become addictive for some writers and, if overused, they lose their flair.
- It's helpful to know that the em dash (—) follows a similar set of rules, except that it is used to create emphasis, and it does not need to separate two full sentences (IC) — the



Content in this document was created by Math & Writing Centre tutors with the support of Student Learning Services and the Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Humber College.



<https://humber.ca/learningresources/>

em dash should also be used sparingly!



*Content in this document was created by Math & Writing Centre tutors with the support of Student Learning Services and the Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Humber College.*



**<https://humber.ca/learningresources/>**