The semicolon is a punctuation mark that joins related sentences. By using one, you solidify the logical progression of the ideas in your writing. This handout will help you use semicolons correctly.

**General Rules**

**Use Semicolons between Complete Sentences**

When using a semicolon, make sure to place it between complete sentences. As a test, replace your semicolon with a period—if the period works, your semicolon will also work.

**Incorrect:** The movie was exciting; great special effects.

**Correct:** The movie was exciting; it had great special effects.

*Note:* In the first example, “great special effects” is not a complete sentence. Though it has a subject (“effects”), it lacks a verb.

**Use Semicolons with Conjunctive Adverbs, Not Coordinating Conjunctions**

While a semicolon is strong enough to join two sentences on its own, there are times when you might want to clarify the relationship between the two. To do this, use a conjunctive adverb. Conjunctive adverbs are words like “however,” “furthermore,” “accordingly,” etc. and come after the semicolon.

**Example:** I was nervous about the math test; however, I ended up getting a good grade.

Do not use a semicolon if you are joining sentences with a coordinating conjunction—one of the FANBOYS (For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So). Use a comma instead.

**Incorrect:** I enjoyed my trip to Hawaii; but it went by far too quickly.

**Correct:** I enjoyed my trip to Hawaii, but it went by far too quickly.

*Note:* For more information on conjunctions, please see our handout on this topic.

**Place Semicolons outside Other Punctuation**

Place semicolons outside of parentheses, quotation marks, and other punctuation.

**Incorrect:** You say “soda”; I say “pop.”

**Correct:** You say “soda,” I say “pop.”
Common Uses

To Link Closely Related Sentences
You can use a semicolon to show a strong connection between two complete sentences that are closely related.

Example: Many public schools are facing larger class sizes; a classroom with 30 students is not uncommon.

In Lists with Commas
Sometimes an element within a list will already contain a comma or other internal punctuation. In this case, avoid confusion by promoting the commas that separate each item in the list to a semicolon.

Confusing: In attendance were Barack Obama, the president of the United States, Mario Monti, the prime minister of Italy, and David Cameron, the prime minister of the United Kingdom.

Better: In attendance were Barack Obama, the president of the United States; Mario Monti, the prime minister of Italy; and David Cameron, the prime minister of the United Kingdom.

References