

Editorial Graphics and Publishing Services

The Semicolon

by Erin Brenner on April 29, 2010

Some people fear it. Others loathe it. Why is the semicolon so misunderstood? The semicolon is a useful piece of punctuation, allowing the writer to organize a more complex thought into one sentence and the reader to more easily understand that thought. Sometimes called a “supercomma,” the semicolon should be in every writer’s toolbox.

The Basics

The semicolon’s main job is to join two *related* independent clauses (sentences) together without a conjunction:

Sean loves chocolate cake; it’s the only kind of cake he’ll eat.

Before and after the semicolon are two complete grammatical sentences:

Sean loves chocolate cake.

It’s the only kind of cake he’ll eat.

Either sentence could stand on its own, but I want to show how closely related they are. So I use the semicolon to join the two together.

The semicolon can also be used to separate items in a list when the items contain commas. This helps the reader distinguish between the items:

Between 1815 and 1850 Americans constructed elaborate networks of roads, canals, and early railroad lines; opened up wide areas of newly acquired land for settlement and trade; and began to industrialize manufacturing. (Sean Wilentz, “Society, Politics, and the Market Revolution,” in *The New American History* 62, as quoted in Garner, 660)

The list in this example is “constructed elaborate networks...,” “opened up wide areas...,” and “began to industrialize manufacturing.” Within the first list item is another list: “roads, canals, and early railroad lines.” The semicolons help the reader keep the information straight.

Let’s Get Fancy

You can join two sentences together with conjunctive adverbs, such as *however*, *indeed*, and *meanwhile*. When you do, use the semicolon to separate the two sentences, not a comma.

Sean will eat only one flavor of cake; however, he will eat several flavors of ice cream.

When a semicolon appears at the end of a phrase in quotation marks, the semicolon goes outside of the quotation marks:

When he eats cake, Duncan likes to sing “I love cake”; Sean doesn’t like to sing while he eats his cake.