

The Semicolon

A **semicolon (;)** is a punctuation mark used between two independent clauses. Semicolons connect independent clauses **only** when the clauses are closely related in meaning and are not joined by a **coordinating conjunction** (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*). There should not be a dependent clause on either side of the semicolon. Remember, a **dependent clause** is a group of words that has a subject and predicate but *cannot* stand on its own (*For example: While Lisa was reading*). On the other hand, an **independent clause** is a group of words with a subject and predicate that *can* stand on its own (*For example: Lisa is reading*).

Rule 1: Use a semicolon between two independent clauses that are closely related in meaning.

- **Wrong:** Going to the circus is fun; I went to the beach. (*clauses are not related in meaning*)
- **Correct:** The weather was warm and sunny; I went to the beach. (*use two independent clauses that relate to one another*)

Rule 2: Do not use a semicolon to link a dependent clause to an independent clause.

- **Wrong:** When I went to the library; I checked out books for my research project. (*dependent clause on left side of semicolon*)
- **Correct:** When I went to the library, I checked out books for my research project. (*fix by replacing semicolon with comma*)

Rule 3: Use a semicolon before conjunctive adverbs (*however, otherwise, therefore, similarly, hence, on the other hand, then, consequently, also, thus* -- remember the acronym HOTSHOT CAT) when they connect two independent clauses.

- **Wrong:** Lisa will bring the napkins, paper plates, and silverware to the picnic however, Chris will not bring anything. (*there is no punctuation before the conjunctive adverb*)
- **Correct:** Lisa will bring the napkins, paper plates, and silverware to the picnic; however, Chris will not bring anything. (*semicolon before the conjunctive adverb*)

Rule 4: Generally, do not use a semicolon before a coordinating conjunction that connects two independent clauses.

- **Wrong:** I like to eat seafood; but my husband prefers Italian. (*should not be a semicolon before the word “but”*)
- **Correct:** I like to eat seafood, but my husband prefers Italian. (*fix by replacing semicolon with comma*)

Rule 5: When listing a series of items in which one or more contain commas, use semicolons to break them apart.

- **Wrong:** I visited three cities: New York, New York, Dallas, Texas, and Chicago, Illinois. (*there are commas within the series of items which may cause confusion*)
- **Correct:** I visited three cities: New York, New York; Dallas, Texas; and Chicago, Illinois. (*fix by using a semicolon to break apart the items in the series*)