The Semicolon: Making Connections

Many writers avoid semi-colons because they’re not sure about how to use them. However, the rules for semi-colons are easy to remember, and using this piece of punctuation can give your writing variety and style.

There are two basic ideas to remember for using semi-colons...

1. **Semicolons separate two complete sentences (otherwise known as independent clauses)**

   Semicolons are used to connect two sentences to avoid a run-on sentence or comma splice.

   **Wrong** (comma splice): Camping is great outdoor activity, it gets you closer to nature.

   **Right**: Camping is a great outdoor activity; it gets you closer to nature.

   **Wrong** (run-on): My brother Trevor enjoys playing sports he’s the captain of a local basketball team.

   **Right**: My brother Trevor enjoys playing sports; he’s the captain of a local basketball team.

   This is the form for using the semi-colon this way:

   **complete sentence; complete sentence**

   The ideas in the two independent clauses should be closely related; the second sentence should expand upon the content of the first sentence. You don’t need to capitalize the complete sentence following the semicolon.

2. **Semi-colons also separate elements of a list, if those elements contain internal commas.**

   Semicolons replace commas in a list if using commas would make the list more ambiguous.

   **Wrong**: When I cleaned out the refrigerator, I found chocolate cake, half-eaten, a can of tomato paste, which had a blue fungus growing on the top, and some possibly edible meat loaf, which had been left in there by my Uncle Rufus.

   **Right**: When I cleaned out the refrigerator, I found chocolate cake, half-eaten; a can of tomato paste, which had a blue fungus growing on the top; and some possibly edible meat loaf, which had been left in there by my Uncle Rufus.

   This is the form for using the semi-colon in a list:

   **element 1a; element 2, element 2a; element 3, element 3a**

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