

## Semicolon

A semicolon (;) is a punctuation mark that separates two elements in a sentence of equal weight. The weight of the pause a semicolon implies is halfway between those of commas and those of terminal marks like periods.

1. One use of the semicolon is to separate complete sentences that are closely related to each other; they may or may not be joined by a transitional expression such as “however” or “for example”. In this usage, the sentences that are connected by the semicolon can be split into two complete sentences on their own.

**Example:** The airport has enjoyed rapidly growing passenger traffic in recent years; it served under 300,000 passengers in 2000, around 1.9 million in 2006, and over two million in 2007.

**Example:** The Heian period in Japan saw a number of influential women authors, such as Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shonagon; however, under the neo-Confucian influences of the Tokugawa shogunate, women authors were almost nonexistent.

**Example of splitting:** The airport has enjoyed rapidly growing passenger traffic in recent years. It served less than 300,000 passengers in 2000, around 1.9 million in 2006, and more than two million in 2007.

2. Semicolons can also be used to separate lists with items that already have commas in them, or items that are grammatically complex.

**Example:** When I visited Europe last summer, I stayed in Venice, Italy; Vienna, Austria; and Bratislava, Slovakia.

**Example:** These authors each reject traditional roles of motherhood in different ways: Ohba Minako by critiquing the institution even as her protagonists participate in it; Tsushima Yuko by rejecting the necessity of men in raising children; and Saegusa Kazuko by rejecting childbearing altogether.

3. In most academic writing, semicolons should not be used before a coordinating conjunctions (FANBOYS: For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So) when joining complete sentences.

**Incorrect:** It may be necessary to find other works; but this will be a lower priority since I already have a number of examples.

**Correct:** It may be necessary to find other works; **however**, this will be a lower priority since I already have a number of examples.

OR

**Correct:** It may be necessary to find other works, **but** this will be a lower priority since I already have a number of examples.

In formal writing, sentences usually do not begin with any of the FANBOYS conjunctions, so this applies to sentences joined by semicolons too. You can change the conjunction used, as in the first correct example, or change the semicolon to a comma, as in the second. (In some forms of writing, using a semicolon may be acceptable in order to create greater contrast between the two clauses, but it is better to err on the side of caution.)

4. Semicolons should also not be used to link groups of words that are not entire sentences.

**Incorrect:** After the debate, my position changed; because I realized that neither candidate could come up with supporting evidence for their claims.

**Correct:** After the debate, my position changed, because I realized that neither candidate could come up with supporting evidence for their claims.

OR

**Correct:** After the debate, my position changed; I realized that neither candidate could come up with supporting evidence for their claims.

Since the phrase starting with “because” is a dependent clause (meaning it cannot stand on its own as a complete sentence), the first sentence isn’t grammatically correct. In these examples, you can use a comma to link the two phrases of the sentence, because a comma is what is normally used to join an independent clause and a dependent clause. Another option is to take out the word “because”, since the sentences are linked closely enough in topic that using a semicolon works well here.

### Need More Help?

- Bedford: pgs. 379-384
- Online quizzes:
  - [http://www2.ivcc.edu/rambo/practice\\_semicolon\\_quiz.htm](http://www2.ivcc.edu/rambo/practice_semicolon_quiz.htm)
  - [http://www.grammarbook.com/grammar\\_quiz/semicolons\\_and\\_colons\\_1.asp](http://www.grammarbook.com/grammar_quiz/semicolons_and_colons_1.asp)
  - <http://www.niu.edu/writingtutorial/punctuation/quizzes/Comma.htm>