



## NO. 17 IN THE WRITING CENTER HANDOUT SERIES

### The Semicolon

*A semicolon looks different than its relative, the colon, in that the bottom half of the semicolon is a comma.*

Semicolons can be used in two ways:

1. **To join together two related statements of equal weight and importance into one sentence.**

*Example:* It is important to proofread your work before turning it in; typos and other mistakes can make you seem careless.

- The purpose of the semicolon in this case is to prevent the choppiness of separating two ideas that are closely related and to ask the reader to make a connection between the two statements. The semicolon also shows a progression from the first statement to the second.
- It is crucial that statements which are separated by a semicolon are independent clauses. A good way to make sure that your use of the semicolon is correct is to separate the statements on either side of the semicolon and put a period between the two instead. Once you are certain that each statement can function alone as a sentence, you can join them.

2. **To separate items in a list which contain internal punctuation.**

*Example:* The Millennium Events Committee has planned several exciting events for spring semester, including lectures by Nikki Giovanni, an African-American poet and human rights activist; Benazir Bhutto, former prime minister of Pakistan; and Sir John Polkinghorne, who will address the topic of science and religion.

- Internal punctuation separates the guests' names from their descriptions. Therefore, the author has used semicolons.
- If none of the items in the list includes internal punctuation, then a comma should be used.

Here are some sentences in which a semicolon is used effectively:

- ✓ The physical differences between Jude and the university students are symbolic of more than just their differing social positions; they are emblems of Jude's ignorance and the impossibility of his dreams.
- ✓ This place of safety and sanity is not on a calm and smooth plane of molten glass; reaching it involves a leap of faith and tough confrontation with the reality of pain and death.
- ✓ In Heart of Darkness, the real danger of going into the wilderness is not that of confronting savages or dying of disease; the thing most to be dreaded is the internal change, the possible descent into madness.

For more information on semicolon usage, see:

*The St. Martin's Handbook* (5th ed): 755-59

<http://englishplus.com/grammar/00000094.htm>

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