



Semicolons: A Write It Well Guide

You confuse your readers when you use semicolons incorrectly. But semicolons add polish and sophistication to your writing when you know what situations call for them.

Like commas, semicolons can separate items in a series. Semicolons also indicate different kinds of transitions within a sentence from one clause to another.

Here are three situations when you'd use a semicolon:

1. To join two unrelated clauses when you don't want to use a conjunction such as *and, but, etc.*:

They agreed to select the lowest bidder; they had to wait ten days for the results.

2. To join two clauses with a word like *therefore, however, etc.*, paired with a comma:

We expected the report to arrive in the first week of June; however, the project

manager has asked for a two-week delay.

3. To separate a series of items that already contain one or more commas:

Four people were unable to attend the meeting: Joe Masumoto, the club treasurer; Keira Jones; Louise Boswart, the club president; and José Rodriguez.

Finally, it's incorrect to use a semicolon when you have a list of three or more items that are very long, but don't have internal commas:

By next Wednesday, we need to edit the brochure to include all the updated language, prepare the mailing list and print labels that include the several dozen new contacts we added this spring, and print and mail all the brochures.

For that sentence, commas alone are just fine; however, a bulleted list would be much easier to read!

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