

Semicolons: Nature's Most Misunderstood Punctuation Mark

Semicolons are tricky little buggers. As a general rule, however, semicolons should only come between items of equal rank: two independent clauses, two phrases, etc. Here are some hints to keep in mind when you're unsure how to use the semicolon:

Semicolons are used to separate items in a list in which each item contains a comma. This helps to separate the individual items from one another without overwhelming (and confusing) the reader with commas:

Example: GVSU students come from as far away as Paris, France; Berlin, Germany; and Rome, Italy.

Semicolons can be used to combine two full sentences (two independent clauses):

Example: The semicolon is your friend; use it to combine two complete sentences.

If you were to rewrite the above sentence with a comma instead of a semicolon, the sentence would be a (grammatically incorrect) comma splice: The semicolon is your friend, use it to combine two complete sentences.

If were to rewrite the sentence, eliminating punctuation between the two phrases, you would have created a fused (or run-on) sentence—also grammatically incorrect: The semicolon is your friend use it to combine two complete sentences.

A grammatically correct way to rewrite the sentence is to replace the semicolon with a conjunction and a comma: The semicolon is your friend, and you can use it to combine two complete sentences.

When using a semicolon with quotation marks, the semicolon always appears **outside** the quotation marks.

Example: The student said, "I love semicolons"; the consultant said, "Me, too!"



AS A GENERAL RULE...

