

Semi-colons



The semi-colon is widely used in formal writing. It is most often used to combined what could otherwise be two complete sentences. Using a semi-colon properly can help you present your thoughts more clearly; it can also add a bit of seriousness and maturity to your tone.

Here is an example of the correct use of a semi-colon:

She was a wonderful teacher; she really cared about each student.

Rules for correct semi-colon usage:

- A semi-colon can be used to connect two statements that could stand alone as sentences (two independent clauses). The two statements need to be related in meaning, with the second part expanding or clarifying the first one.

He thought he knew everything. He really knew very little.

He thought he knew everything; he really knew very little.

- The two parts are sometimes linked by a conjunctive adverb (however, moreover, still, therefore, nevertheless, thus, etc.) placed after the semi-colon.

He was a penniless dreamer; nevertheless, she wanted to marry him.

He was a penniless dreamer; he was, moreover, deeply in debt.

- A special use of the semi-colon is to clarify the items in a list when there would be too many commas to make the meaning clear.

We went to the game with three people: Kate, my older sister and a real baseball fan; my next-door neighbor, Harry Parker, another huge fan; and his wife Jennie, who couldn't care less.

- Using a semi-colon is a good way to correct one of the worst punctuation errors, the comma splice. A comma splice occurs when two stand-alone clauses are joined with just a comma. A comma can't do that, but a semi-colon can.

He liked all living creatures, he even liked snakes. (Comma splice)

He liked all living creatures; he even liked snakes.

Practice

Here are some incorrect uses of the semi-colon. Can you see what's wrong in each sentence?

1. Although he was a weak candidate; he still won the election.
2. She was an outstanding student; but not the best in the class.
3. It was a lovely spring day; the morning paper was late.
4. It was a lovely spring morning; but rain clouds were starting to form.

Answers

In #1, the first part can't stand alone as a sentence; it's a dependent clause. Use just a comma.

Although he was a weak candidate, he still won the election.

In #2, the second part can't stand alone; it's just a phrase. Use a comma or no punctuation.

She was an outstanding student, but not the best in the class.

She was an outstanding student but not the best in the class.

In #3, the two parts are unrelated in meaning. Keep them as separate sentences.

It was a lovely spring day. The morning paper was late.

In #4, the two parts can both stand alone, but the presence of *but*, a coordinating conjunction (but, and, or, for, so, nor, yet), makes the semi-colon unnecessary. Use just a comma.

It was a lovely spring day, but rain clouds were starting to form.