



SEMICOLONS

Semicolons are not nearly as cryptic or difficult to use as you might believe. In fact, they are only used in a few different ways.

Joining Two Complete Sentences Together

Semicolons are particularly handy with sentences that contain a **comma splice**. One example of a comma splice is when a comma has been incorrectly placed between two complete sentences. This construction is considered incorrect in the English language.

Often writers will use commas to “splice” two sentences that seem to flow together so well that they seem like one sentence. Even though a comma splice can be easily fixed by placing a period between the two sentences, doing so may cause the related ideas to become too choppy, weak, and separated, thus ruining the desired flow.

The following sentences could be connected with a semicolon:

I never saw it coming. It all happened so quickly.

Examples:

Wrong: I never saw it coming, it all happened so quickly.

Right: I never saw it coming; it all happened so quickly.

The first example is incorrect because it contains a comma splice.

The second example keeps the related sentences together but combines them in a way that is grammatically acceptable in the English language.

Replacing Confusing Commas in Lists

Sometimes, when listing a series of items or people, a writer needs to provide additional information to the primary list. This can cause the commas to become confusing because the reader will not be able to determine whether something between commas is part of the list or is description.

Using semicolons instead of commas between the items in the list and reserving commas for the additional information will help clarify this for the reader.

Examples:

Wrong: I received references from Dr. Black, associate professor of history, Dr. Stephens, professor of political science, and Dr. Williams, vice-president of academic affairs.

Right: I received references from Dr. Black, associate professor of history; Dr. Stephens, professor of political science; and Dr. Williams, vice-president of academic affairs.

In the first example, the reader might become confused and think references were given by six different people.

The semicolons in the second example make the number of references (three) more easily understood.