Using Semicolons (;)

Semicolons are confusing for many people, but is a useful device. They indicate a link between closely-related ideas which could, in principle, stand as separate sentences. By using a semicolon, you place an emphasis on the connection between the ideas, particularly if you add a connector word like *however* or *thus* after the semicolon. The semicolon can also help your writing sound more sophisticated when used correctly.

Notice where they occur in your readings; being able to identify them will help you to learn how to use them effectively in your own writing.

Three main uses

1. To connect and show a relationship between independent clauses.

2. Before a connector word between two ideas.

3. To separate items in a complex list that also needs commas.

Connecting ideas
To indicate a link between two closely related ideas, join the clauses with a semicolon. Using a semicolon provides a stronger link between the ideas than a comma.

- *Some people write with a word processor; others write with a pen or pencil.*
- *Some supported the company manager; others resigned in protest.*
- *I love the ferris wheel; it is my favourite showground ride.*

Before connector words
- *There was a chance for a reconciliation; <u>however,</u> the manager did not wish to take it.*
  (Note the comma following the connector word.)
- *I like playgrounds; <u>however,</u> the ferris wheel is my favourite ride.*
- *But however they choose to write, people are allowed to make their own decisions; <u>as a result,</u> many people swear by their writing methods.*
  (Note the use of a transitional phrase to connect the clauses.)

Listing items
Where your list of items or series already contains commas, using a semicolon will help to avoid confusion between list items. Semicolons are particularly useful if the clauses are lengthy.

- *I have had great ferris wheel rides in Adelaide, South Australia; Ballarat, Victoria; and St. Kilda, Melbourne.*
- *Some people write with a word processor, typewriter, or a computer; but others, for different reasons, choose to write with a pen or pencil.*
- *There are basically two ways to write: with a pen or pencil, which is inexpensive and easily accessible; or by computer and printer, which is more expensive but quick and neat.*
- *The company had several important stakeholders: the CEO, Bob Smith; the President, Winston Johnston; the Operational Manager, Jill Dawes; and the Treasurer, Frank Williams.*

A comma or a semicolon?

- **Incorrect:** *The cow is brown, it is also old.*
- **Correct:** *The cow is brown; it is also old.*

Why: Commas should not be used to connect independent clauses if there is no coordinating conjunction (e.g., *and, but, or*). This mistake is known as a comma splice.

- **Incorrect:** *I like cows, however, I hate the way they smell.*
- **Correct:** *I like cows; however, I hate the way they smell.*

Why: The word *however* (a conjunctive adverb) shows a connection between the two ideas, and commas should not be used as a connector if there is no coordinating conjunction (e.g., *and, but, or*).

- **Incorrect:** *I like cows: they give us milk, which tastes good, they give us beef, which also tastes good, and they give us leather, which is used for shoes and coats.*
- **Correct:** *I like cows: they give us milk, which tastes good; they give us beef, which also tastes good; and they give us leather, which is used for shoes and coats.*

Why: Without semicolons to separate them, it's unclear what the three list items are because commas are also being used.

- **Incorrect:** *Cows, though their bovine majesty has been on the wane in recent millenia, are still one of the great species of this planet, domesticated, yet proud, they ruminate silently as we humans pass tumultuously by.*
- **Correct:** *Cows, though their bovine majesty has been on the wane in recent millenia, are still one of the great species of this planet; domesticated, yet proud, they ruminate silently as we humans pass tumultuously by.*

Why: Without a semicolon, it is unclear where the first sentence ends and the second begins.

Other helpsheets available

- Punctuation
- Apostrophes
- Capitalisation
- Sentence Structure
- Writing in an Academic Style