



# The Writing Center @ JSCC

## Semicolons

Semicolons are a commonly misused piece of punctuation, but their proper use can mark a writer as increasingly proficient! Semicolons may be used in two ways: to separate independent clauses and to separate items in an independently punctuated list.

### **Independent Clauses**

Semicolons may be used anywhere a period is used. While periods signal relatively strong separation between sentences' subject matters, a semicolon signals a closer relationship.

[Remember than an independent clause is a complete sentence: a subject and tensed verb pair without a subordinator at its head.]

Here are some examples:

1. Amjed broke his toe last week; he had to drop out of the marathon.
2. Samaya brought the french onion dip to the party; people have requested it at every party.

Here are some improperly used semicolons [with explanations]:

1. Amjed broke his toe last week; I am going to adopt a puppy from the shelter. [These sentences are not closely enough related to warrant a semicolon.]
2. Samaya brought the french onion dip; her specialty. ["her specialty" is not an independent clause (or sentence), so the semicolon is not appropriate.]

### **Punctuated Lists**

The other major use for semicolons is to separate items in a list that has internal punctuation, usually commas. Consider the following example:

1. The other students in my history class are from Peru, Illinois, Akron, Ohio, San Francisco, California, Paris, Tennessee, Syracuse, New York, and Washington, D.C.

This sentence is pretty difficult to understand, right? We're not quite sure where to separate the items in the list: Are these cities and states? Are they a combination of cities, states, and countries? Are there eleven other students or just six?

Here's a corrected sentence, using semicolons, to make things clearer:

2. The other students in my history class are from Peru, Illinois; Akron, Ohio; San Francisco, California; Paris, Tennessee; Syracuse, New York; and Washington, D.C.

Use semicolons in place of extra commas if your list is made of complex items, just be sure to be consistent in where you put the commas and where you put the semicolons.