

Writing and Study Skills Services – Laurier Brantford
Using the Semicolon

1. Two sentences can be connected by a semicolon when their meaning is connected.
 - A period is used to indicate the end of one grammatical sentence. However, **when two sentences are linked by the same idea, they can be combined with a semicolon.**

Why farmers in China began to cultivate the soybean is unclear; plants that lie on the ground are hard to cultivate, and the seeds of the wild soybean are tiny, hard and, unless properly prepared, indigestible.

- Often the second “sentence” adds detail, provides an explanation, or points out a contrast. In this case, the second “sentence,” or clause, in the above example provides an explanation.
2. Use a semicolon between closely related independent clauses not joined by a coordinating conjunction.
 - When related independent clauses appear in one sentence, they are ordinarily connected with a comma and a coordinating junction (and, but, for, nor, so, yet) and the conjunction expresses the relation between the clauses. **If the relationship is clear without the conjunction, the sentences may be connected with a semicolon instead.**

“Injustice is relatively easy to bear, but what stings is justice” is more effectively written as “Injustice is relatively easy to bear; what stings is justice” (Hacker 207).

- You must use a semicolon if you omit a coordinating junction (and, but, for, nor, so, yet).

Incorrect - Comma Splice:

- ✗ *Most Canadian hospitals offer only Western methods of treatment, hospitals in China provide both Western and traditional Chinese medicine.*

Correct using a comma:

- ✓ *Most Canadian hospitals offer only Western methods of treatment, **but** hospitals in China provide both Western and traditional Chinese medicine.*

Correct using a semi-colon:

- ✓ *Most Canadian hospitals offer only Western methods of treatment; hospitals in China provide both Western and traditional Chinese medicine (Hacker 208).*

3. Use a semicolon between independent clauses linked with a transitional expression (conjunctive adverbs and transitional phrases).

- **When a transitional expression appears between independent clauses, it is preceded by a semicolon and often followed by a comma.**

*I learned all the rules and regulations; **however**, I never really learned to control the ball* (Hacker 208).

4. Use a semicolon in place of a comma to separate major items in a complex list (that is, where at least one of the items contains a comma).

Classic science fiction sagas are Star Trek, with Mr. Spock and his large pointed ears; Battlestar Galactica, with its Cylon Raiders; and Star Wars, with Han Solo, Luke Skywalker, and Darth Vader (Hacker 209).

Works Cited and Consulted:

Hacker, Diana. *A Canadian Writer's Reference*. 2nd ed. Toronto: Nelson Canada, 1996. Print.

Raimes, Ann. *How English Works: A Grammar Handbook with Readings*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. Print.

Swan, Michael. *Practical English Usage*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003. Print.