The Semicolon

The semicolon is another important tool; it can serve two important functions: *as a connector between two sentences* and *as a supercomma*.

**1) To Connect Two Sentences**

The semicolon is most often used to connect two sentences. Obviously, the sentences ought to be relatively close in content.

The diagram below may be useful:

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SENTENCE ; SENTENCE
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Writing generally puts together complex items and shows how they relate. A semicolon is an economical way to join two sentences, and therefore two ideas, to illustrate their relationship. For example, review the following sentences:

- Jim is a good typist; he makes few mistakes.
- The AFC Corporation is an excellent company to invest in; its investments have risen sharply and steadily over each of the last ten years.
- Ms. Sanchez is a successful real estate salesperson; however, she was unable to sell her own house.

Each of the three examples above contains two sentences glued together by a semicolon. The second part of each sentence makes a comment on the first. Certainly, each sentence could be written as two sentences, but they would no express the close relationship between the two parts that the semicolon indicates. Because a period requires that the reading halt before proceeding, the connection
between the two ideas is also halted. The semi-colon indicates a small pause between two closely related ideas. Using a semi-colon can be an efficient way to effect transitions.

Remember to have a complete sentence on both sides of the semicolon. If the second sentence begins with a conjunction (and, but, or, etc.), the semicolon is not necessary because the conjunction and the comma that usually goes with it are equivalent to a semicolon. Instead, combine two full sentences with the semicolon.

Sometimes a sentence may begin with words like however, therefore, and nevertheless. If the second sentence begins with one of these words, and if it is indeed a full sentence, a semicolon is still necessary to connect the two. The sentence about Ms. Sanchez illustrates this use.

A word of caution—never glue two sentences together with only a comma. Grammarians call this sentence error a comma splice. Here is an example of two sentences connected with only a comma:

The banking community became quite upset at the rise in the prime rate, bankers felt that they would ultimately lose a considerable amount of money.

A comma splice is considered ungrammatical because the first sentence runs into the next without indicating that the thought complete. Running ideas together like this is disorienting. Effective writers avoid the comma splice. Here are two additional examples of comma splices:

Ms. Linccini is a fine worker, she meets all her deadlines.

Our sales have increased by twenty percent, our inventory has been reduced by thirty percent.

Each of the examples above constitutes two sentences glued together with a comma. A semi-colon can correct a comma splice as can a comma with a conjunction, or, of course, a period to separate the two sentences. The final draft cannot contain comma splices.

One instance can occur in which a comma splice is considered acceptable. Occasionally, a list of items can stand alone as a full sentence. Commas may attach these items so long as it is clear that this is a list of relatively equal items. Here is an example:

I opened the safe door, I took out the money pouch, and I concealed it in
my desk drawer.

The example above shows a list of three items and illustrates a step-by-step process. Even though the items all constitute full sentences, commas work here but only because they are members of a larger list. When in doubt about using commas to connect sentences in a list, try rewriting the sentence. Stay alert for any two sentences that are connected by only a comma.

Related to the comma splice is the run-on sentence. Run-on sentences, often called “fused” sentences, are two sentences punctuated as if they were one. In other words, a run-on is a comma splice without the comma: two sentences smashed together with no punctuation between them. Here are two sample run-ons:

Chu Lie is the foreman Joseph Garcia is the line boss.

I knew that the new personnel policy would cause problems the union is reacting quite vehemently.

Each of the two samples above is composed of two sentences. They need semicolons, commas and coordinating conjunctions, or periods.

2) As Supercomma

Normally, commas separate the members of a list, as in this sentence:

I have just bought shares in IBM, USAG, and ITT.

The commas indicate where one item ends and the next begins. Sometimes, however, a list of complex items and one (or more) of the items already contains a comma. Such a case may cause confusion about what is really a member of the list and what is not. A semi-colon, working as sort of a supercomma, can prevent this confusion. The sentence below illustrates how the supercomma works:

Suncom Corporation has subsidiaries in four cities: New York, New York, Wilmington, Ohio, Houston, Texas, and San Francisco, California.

This sentence contains too many commas, both between the members of the list and within them. Instead, a semicolon, or supercomma, between each of the members can clarify the meaning:

Suncom Corporation has subsidiaries in four cities: New York, New York; Wilmington, Ohio; Houston, Texas; and San Francisco, California.
The second sentence is clearer than the first because the semi-colon or supercomma indicates exactly where the members of the list begin and end. This situation does not occur often, but if the sentence contains a list of items, one (or more) of which already contains a comma, a supercomma can clarify the meaning.