



## THE SEMICOLON

*Related Handouts:* TERMS TO KNOW: Vital Sentence Elements, Clauses and Sentence Types; COMMA SPLICES AND RUN-ON SENTENCES

**THE PRINCIPLE:** The semicolon is perhaps one of the most abused symbols in the English language. Yet its general, two-fold purpose is simple and direct:

- Use the semicolon to separate two **independent clauses** (i.e., complete sentences) when there is no coordinate conjunction (*and, or, but, for, yet, so*) between them.
- Use the semicolon to separate items in a series in which commas are also present. In this usage, some have dubbed it the “super comma.”

1) The semicolon as a connector of independent clauses:

An **independent clause** is a group of words that can stand alone as a sentence.

When two independent clauses are closely related in meaning, you may want to put them together into a single sentence. That’s fine; just punctuate the sentence correctly. Here are your choices:

- a) Simply put a semicolon between the two independent clauses.

Ex: Harry wished to travel into Hogsmeade with his friends; Ron and Hermione both had class and could not go.

- b) Join the independent clauses with a comma plus coordinating conjunction (*and, or, but, for, yet, so*), thus creating a **compound sentence**.

Ex: Harry wished to travel into Hogsmeade with his friends, **but** Ron and Hermione both had class and could not go.

*Just beware the dreaded comma splice!* What you should NOT do is put simply a comma (without the conjunction) between the two independent clauses.

WRONG: Harry wished to travel into Hogsmeade with his friends, Ron and Hermione both had class and could not go.

- c) If, instead of joining the two independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction, you want to use an **adverbial conjunction** (the most common ones being *however, therefore, furthermore, nevertheless, moreover, consequently*), then you need to use a

semicolon instead of a comma before the adverbial conjunction; **moreover**, you need a comma after the adverbial conjunction.

Ex: Harry wished to travel into Hogsmeade with his friends; **however**, Ron and Hermione both had class and could not go.

2) The semicolon in a series of items with internal commas:

In a series of three or more items, each item is normally separated with a comma:

Ex: In Hogsmeade Harry bought every-flavor jelly beans, chocolate frogs, a new cauldron, and a present for Fleur.

However, occasionally you may wish to add more description or information to each item in the list, requiring additional commas. This may give you more commas than you or your reader can handle:

Ex: In Hogsmeade Harry bought every-flavor jelly beans, especially strawberry shortcake ones, chocolate frogs, his favorite treat, a new cauldron, which he desperately needed, and a present for Fleur, as he was taking her to the ball next week.

Here it's hard to tell whether "his favorite treat" is another item on the shopping list or a description of the chocolate frogs. Super comma to the rescue! Use semicolons to separate each item, complete with its own commas, from the next item:

In Hogsmeade Harry bought every-flavor jelly beans, especially strawberry shortcake ones; chocolate frogs, his favorite treat; a new cauldron, which he desperately needed; and a present for Fleur, as he was taking her to the ball next week.

**A WORD OF CAUTION:** Don't overdo the semicolon; it is not simply interchangeable with the comma. Use a semicolon *only* when

- You have complete sentences on both sides of it, OR when
- You have written a rather complicated list in which each item has its own commas.