SEMICOLONS

How do semicolons function in a sentence?

You have three options for putting punctuation between two complete sentences. Most often, you will use a period. Other times, you may join together two sentences with a conjunction (i.e. and, but) and a comma. In the third option, discussed here, you can join together two sentences using a semicolon. Using a semicolon can help you suggest to the reader that there is a particular connection between the two sentences that the reader should think about.

How and when do writers use semicolons?

1. Joining two related independent clauses (complete thoughts/sentences) in a sentence.

Ex. Writing papers may take a mental toll; use frequent naps to help the mind recuperate.

OR

Ex. The initial popularity of the Beatles did not fade; “Love Me Do” was the first of twenty-seven

number one hits for the group.

1. Joining two independent clauses using words such as “however” and “nonetheless.”

Ex. My fingers were cramping from overuse; nonetheless, I continued to type.

OR

Ex. Thousands of fans flocked to stadiums to see the Beatles; however, no one could hear the

band over the crowd’s roar.

1. Indicating a break within a list that already uses commas (this is the only time a semicolon takes the place of a comma).

Ex. On our roadtrip, we visited Louisville, Kentucky; Athens, Georgia; and Austin, Texas.

OR

Ex. The Beatles were John Lennon, guitarist; Paul McCartney, bassist; George Harrison, guitarist;

and Ringo Starr, drummer.

When do writers avoid using a semicolon?

1. Joining two clauses which are not both independent:

Ex. Riding a bicycle down the street; Doris waved to her friends.

OR

Ex. I meant to do the dishes today; but I took a nap instead.

Both of these examples need a comma instead.

1. Introducing a list:

Ex. Television can do many things; introduce new ideas, present compelling stories, and fry your

retinas.

The correct punctuation mark here is a colon.