

Semicolon

A semicolon is a [punctuation](#) mark that separates independent clauses, or to repair a [comma splice](#). As it suggests a close link between two clauses, it appears mostly in academic writing. However, is not popularly used in informal prose writing. For example, in the [sentence](#), “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there” (*The Go-Between*, by L.P. Hartley), the underlined semicolon separates two clauses.

Difference between Semicolon and Colon

Both a colon and a semicolon indicate a connection between two ideas; however, the function of these two marks is somewhat different. A semicolon separates the main components of a sentence, while joining two independent clauses. For example, in the [phrase](#), “They drive Jaguar; we drive Ferrari,” both independent clauses have been joined with a semicolon.

On the other hand, a colon introduces a list of things, a quotation, an explanation, or expansion. It comes after an independent [clause](#). For example, in the sentence “He taught us the basic rules of language: style, grammar, pronunciation, and punctuation,” the colon introduces a list of the basic rules. This use is different from that of a semicolon.

Examples of Semicolon in Literature

Example #1: *Lights Out for the Territory* (by Iain Sinclair)

“The angled umbrellas, canes, and rolled newspapers of Frank’s grim financiers are non-functional, wands of office; they are used to measure distance, to maintain a decent interval between intimate strangers competing for the same destination.”

In this example, the underlined semicolon is separating two main parts (clauses) of the sentence, connecting two independent clauses.

Example #2: *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (by Richard Rodriguez)

“Everything about our sessions pleased me: the smallness of the room; the noise of the janitor’s broom hitting the edge of the long hallway outside the door; the green of the sun, lighting the wall; and the old woman’s face blurred white with a beard.”

Rodriguez has used three semicolons in this excerpt. All of them provide a break in the long sentence, while keeping the thought flowing. They are stronger than commas, and connect the ideas of the clauses.

Example #3: *Did He Say ‘Meep’?* (by Michael J. Nelson)

“Part of the appeal of going to a small, not-so-good college is that a certain percentage of the professors are quite insane, and therefore colorful. It’s my opinion, having attended one of these colleges myself, that of those professors who were insane, the demographics broke down something like this: one third had always been insane; one third had been professors at other, better colleges, where they went insane and were sent down to the minors; and the final third were just insane people faking their professor-ness.”

The author has used semicolons twice in this example. All are independent clauses, but semicolons join them together through a common idea.

Example #4: *Stranger in the Village* (by James Baldwin)

“There are the children who make those delightful, hilarious, sometimes astonishingly grave overtures of friendship in the

taught that the devil is a black man, scream in genuine anguish as I approach. Some of the older women never pass without a friendly greeting, never pass, indeed, if it seems that they will be able to engage me in conversation; other women look down or look away or rather contemptuously smirk.”

Here, semicolons highlight the relationship between two clauses. For example, the author talks about two categories of children, in two separate clauses.

Example #5: *Leave It to Psmith* (by P.G. Wodehouse)

“The air was full of the scent of growing things; strange, shy creatures came and went about him...But Baxter had temporarily lost his sense of smell; he feared and disliked the strange, shy creatures; the nightingale left him cold; and the only thought the towering castle inspired in him was that it looked as if a fellow would need half a ton of dynamite to get into it.”

Wodehouse has given an excellent example of the use of semicolons in this passage. They are dividing clauses from one another, yet conveying what Baxter likes and dislikes.

Function of Semicolon

A semicolon works well when a sentence needs a shift or modification. As semicolons are stronger than commas, and weaker than periods, they play an important role in joining independent clauses to give proper meaning to a sentence. They also help in removing sentence fragments and comma splices in writing, making it cohesive and well-connected.