

How to Use a Semi-Colon



Learning Objective

- To understand what a semi-colon does.

Success Criteria

- To use a semi-colon to separate items in a list.
- To use a semi-colon to join two clauses, where the ideas or events in each clause are closely linked.
- To understand how a semi-colon can be used for different purposes.

How to Use a Semi-Colon



Read these two pieces of text.

The guests arrived at the party: Tom and Sarah; Paul, who had brought a present; and Christine, James and Lizzy. There was music, food and drinks on offer.

I thoroughly enjoyed that book; it was a delight to read.

Focus on the semi-colons.

Discuss with your partner why the semi-colons have been used in each of the examples.

How to Use a Semi-Colon

A semi-colon can be used to separate phrases in a list (as opposed to just words where a comma is used).

For example:

The guests arrived at the party: Tom and Sarah; Paul, who had brought a present; and Christine, James and Lizzy. There was music, food and drinks on offer.

The first sentence uses semi-colons to break up the items in the list so that we understand how and when things happened. We learn that Tom and Sarah arrive together, as do Christine, James and Lizzy. Paul is the only one who arrives alone, but we learn he brought a present. This is a potentially complex list made clear by the semi-colons breaking it up.

The second sentence, which also has a list, does not need semi-colons because it is short and simple enough to understand.

How to Use a Semi-Colon

A semi-colon can be used to join two clauses when events or ideas in each clause are closely linked.

For example:

I thoroughly enjoyed that book; it was a delight to read.

In this sentence, the second clause explains the first clause. We could rewrite this sentence as 'I enjoyed that book because it was a delight to read.' We could also split it up into two sentences: 'I enjoyed that book. It was a delight to read.'

By using a semi-colon, we no longer need the conjunction. It also gives the writing more variety than two short sentences.

See what I did there?

Remember:

The two clauses must be related in some way; we should not just use a semi-colon instead of a full stop whenever we feel like it.

Rules

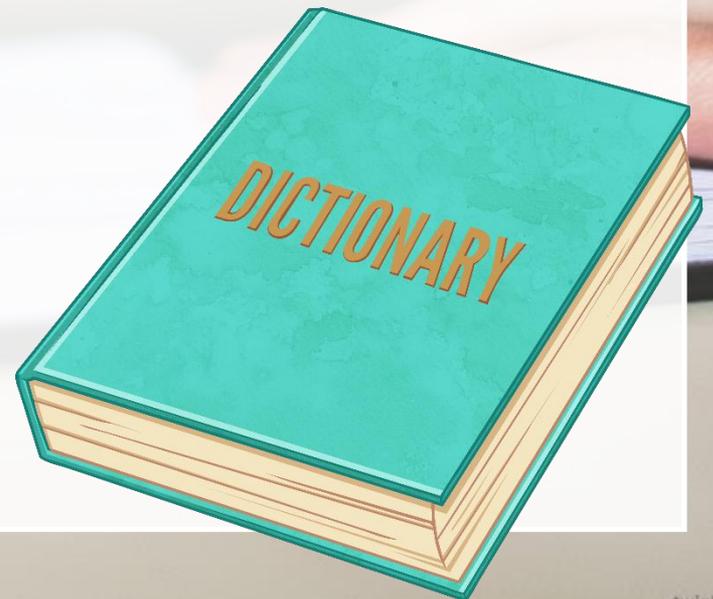
A semi-colon shows a relationship between two ideas. We use it to get the reader to think about that relationship rather than being totally explicit by using a conjunction, such as 'because' or 'therefore'.

A semi-colon can be replaced by other punctuation marks like a full stop (when joining two clauses) or a comma (in a list).

Although they really help to clear up a complex list, there are no occasions when you absolutely must use a semi-colon. There are, however, certainly occasions when you shouldn't.

A semi-colon **does not**:

- always just replace a full stop;
- introduce a list;
- end a sentence.



Your Turn



Remembering these rules, read through the following text and have a go at inserting semi-colons:

I'm quite sunburnt. We came back from our holidays yesterday.

I packed everything I needed for the exam: my pens, ruler, calculator, pencils and eraser.

It looked like it was going to be a very hot day. I wore my sunglasses.

I couldn't believe my eyes: streamers dangled from the ceiling, balloons hovered high in each corner, presents were stacked in a column against the wall and windows, which I could barely see out of and coloured lights lit the doorway ready for the guest of honour to arrive.

Your Turn



I'm quite sunburnt; we came back from our holidays yesterday.

In this case, the second clause explains the first.

I packed everything I needed for the exam: my pens, ruler, calculator, pencils and eraser.

There is no need for a semi-colon here because the list is simple enough to understand with commas.

It looked like it was going to be a very hot day; I wore my sunglasses.

Here, the second clause is a consequence of the first.

I couldn't believe my eyes: streamers dangled from the ceiling; balloons hovered high in each corner; presents were stacked in a column against the wall and windows, which I could now barely see out of; and coloured lights lit the doorway ready for the guest of honour to arrive.

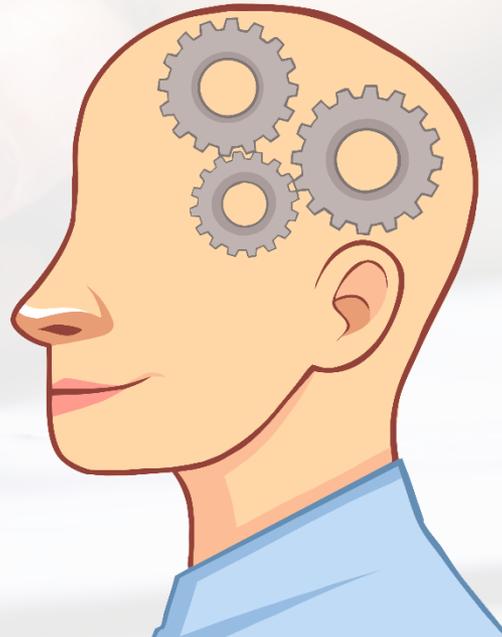
This is quite a complex list, so it benefits from being broken up by semi-colons. The list still has a comma, but we understand this is an embedded clause to describe the windows.

Activity Sheet



Now have a go at the activity sheet independently.

Extension: once you have completed the examples given to you, try to come up with some of your own.



Plenary



Write down:

- 3 occasions when you shouldn't use a semi-colon;
- 2 occasions when you can use a semi-colon;
- 1 way a semi-colon can improve your writing.

You shouldn't use a semi-colon: to introduce a list; to replace just any full stop; to end a sentence.

You can use a semi-colon: to separate items in a list; to connect two clauses.

A semi-colon can improve your writing by: demonstrating your grasp of wider punctuation; preventing you from using too many short sentences.