

A Quick Guide To Semicolons (;)

The semicolon is a common punctuation mark in Academic English. Used correctly, it can add clarity, enhance the reader's understanding of how ideas are related to each other, and help the writer achieve a more free-flowing style. However, semicolons should also be used with care; overusing them can make writing more difficult to understand.

Before studying this guide, you should first familiarise yourself with the material covered in the following:

- [A Quick to Full Stops](#)
- [A Quick Guide to Commas](#)
- [A Quick Guide to Writing Sentences \(Simple, Compound & Complex\)](#)

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1: Overview

Full stops are essential for separating distinct units of chunks of meaning, and commas are often vital for helping readers navigate longer or more complicated sentences. Semicolons are different in that they are rarely essential or necessary; instead, they are mostly used at the writer's discretion to achieve very specific effects.

Like a comma, a semicolon indicates to the reader where the reader should pause while reading the sentence. Unlike a comma, a semicolon can, in particular circumstances, be used instead of a full stop and without using a conjunction or joining word:

A: The procedure is flawed. It is difficult to follow. ✓

B: The procedure is flawed, for it is difficult to follow. ✓

C: The procedure is flawed; it is difficult to follow. ✓

PAUSE

Notice that there is no requirement for a subsequent capital letter after using a semicolon (example 'C' above). Because this convention is similar to what we do when using a comma, but different from what we do when using a full stop, the semicolon can sometimes seem a puzzling and ambiguous punctuation mark.

2: Connecting Complete Sentences That Are Closely Linked in Content or Meaning

As explained more fully in [A Quick Guide to Writing Sentences](#), a simple sentence must make complete sense:

- The analysis is flawed. Further data is required.

If we consider our two sentences to be closely related in content or meaning, we have the option of joining them with a semicolon as follows:

- The analysis is flawed. Further data is required.

In the example above, the reader is meant to infer that the ‘further data’ required will help to solve the problem of ‘the analysis’ being ‘flawed’. As such, the two statements can be considered closely linked in meaning and the use of the semicolon is justified.

It is acceptable to use a semicolon to link longer, more complicated sentences together, if the two sentences are closely related:

- A: Many of the original Ofsted inspector teams in 1993 were made up of newly independent inspectors, but many others were within, or linked to, LEA school improvement services’.
- B: Many of the original Ofsted inspector teams in 1993 were made up of newly independent inspectors; many others were within, or linked to, LEA school improvement services’.

Version B is arguably ‘smoother’ and more free-flowing due to the absence of the conjunction ‘but’. However, the absence of ‘but’ diminishes the sense of contrast between the two sentences. This is an illustration of how the use of a semicolon is very much at the writer’s own discretion and depends on the precise effect they wish to achieve.

3: Semicolons Used to Replace Conjunctions

As explained more fully in [A Quick Guide to Writing Sentences](#), we can join two simple sentences together using a conjunction (joining word) preceded by a comma. Each half of the compound sentence still makes sense on its own (if we imagine the comma and the conjunction have disappeared):

- The analysis is successful, and no further data is required.

Once again, if we consider the two halves of our compound sentence to be closely related in content or meaning, we can instead link them with a semicolon:

- The analysis is successful; no further data is required.

Below are two further valid examples, with the 'B' sentence in each pair showing how a semicolon can potentially be used instead of the comma and the conjunction:

A: Walking is beneficial, for it increases blood flow to the heart.

B: Walking is beneficial; it increases blood flow to the heart.

A: The premise was valid, but the deductions were questionable.

B: The premise was valid; the deductions were questionable.

In the second paired example above, sentence 'B' now lacks a sense of contrast because the conjunction 'but' has been removed. The sentence is grammatically correct but arguably less successful in conveying its intended meaning. See Section 4 for a valid solution.

4: Semicolons Used with Conjunctive Adverbs

In [Section 4 of A Quick Guide to Commas](#), we saw that there is a class of words called conjunctive adverbs that cannot link simple sentences together like conjunctions. Instead, they are used to start a new sentence:

- The results were published. However, they were flawed.
- The results were surprising. Furthermore, they were unwelcome.
- The results were unsatisfactory. Therefore, they must be reviewed.
- The results were unsatisfactory. Moreover, they were controversial.
- The results were satisfactory. Nevertheless, there was room for improvement.

In each of our examples above, the two separate sentences are closely related in meaning. Therefore, applying the same rule set out in Section 2 of this guide, we can instead use semicolons to join the sentences:

- The results were published; however, they were flawed.
- The results were surprising; furthermore, they were unwelcome.

(etc)

Using a conjunctive adverb in this way, after a semicolon, is useful for emphasising or making more explicit the relationship between the first and second halves of our connected sentence. As such, it is a valid solution to the issue discussed at the end of Section 3 of this guide.

5: Avoiding Mistakes with Semicolons

PAUSE

For grammatical explanations of what is meant by ‘dependent’ and ‘independent’ parts of sentences, please see [Sections 5, 8 and 9 of A Quick Guide to Writing Sentences](#).

Sometimes, a sentence will consist of one half that is dependent on the other half for its meaning:

- Although they were published, the results were not shared. ✓

In the example above, the first half of the sentence (‘Although they were published’) does not make complete sense on its own; it is dependent. We need to read the second half of the sentence (‘the results were not shared’) to gain an understanding of what is being said. In circumstances like this, it would not be appropriate to use a semicolon as the dependent part does not make sense on its own:

- Although they were published; the results were not shared. X

If we wanted to use a semicolon, we would need to make sure that each half of the sentence was independent of the other:

- The results were published; they were not shared. ✓

Grammatically, the above sentence is now correct. However, it is debatable whether the link between the two statements is as clear as it was when one of them was dependent on the other:

- Although they were published, the results were not shared. ✓

This is a useful illustration of how using a semicolon may not always be the best option, and why they should be used carefully and thoughtfully.

6: Semicolons for Serial Lists

In [Section 7 of A Quick Guide to Commas](#), we saw that commas can be used to separate items in a list:

- Forms of transport include car, train, bus, tram, bike, boat... (etc)

We saw that there is generally no need to use a comma to separate the penultimate item in our list from the final item. Instead, we use the conjunctions 'and' / 'or':

- More people should travel by bus, train and tram.
- More people should travel by bus, train or tram.

We also saw that commas can be used for lists of phrases:

- People mentioned taking bus rides, travelling to work by train and enjoying tourist trips by tram.

Finally, we saw that commas can even be used to separate whole sentences:

- I travel by bus, my brother takes the train, my mother catches the tram and my father walks everywhere.

However, sometimes the contents of our list become so long and/or complicated that it becomes more effective to use semicolons than commas. In these cases, the semicolon helps readers keep track of the divisions between the items:

- I need the weather statistics for the following cities: London, England; London, Ontario; Seville, Spain; Paris, Ontario; Perth, Scotland and Perth, Ontario.

In the example above, our listed items are complicated by the fact that they each contain a city and a country, separated by a comma. If we also used commas to separate each item in the list, the punctuation would become very confusing.

7: Avoiding Overuse of Semicolons

There are many reasons why some sentences end up becoming too long, complex or overloaded. Overuse of the semicolon is one contributing factor.

Consider the following example:

- Another emerging application of multicultural coaching is in leadership development; large global companies invest in providing training, mentoring and executive coaching for their leaders; while the current trend is for organisational coaching to be developmental rather than remedial, there is still coaching that is provided for leaders who are not performing to the expected standard’.

Grammatically, there is nothing wrong with the above example. However, taken as a whole, the passage is rather dense and difficult to read.

Contributing factors are the third sentence already being quite long and complex, and the fact that commas are used in two of the three sentences. Not every sentence seems related enough in meaning to justify all the semicolons.

REFLECT:

When it comes to breaking up complex passages into more easily-read ‘units’ of meaning, the full stop is the essential punctuation mark. Semicolons are a useful alternative to have ‘in reserve’, but it is best not to overuse them.

- Full stops are essential; semicolons are at the writer’s discretion.

8: Further Steps to Improve Your Punctuation

In addition to studying this guide, we recommend the following:

Enrol on the English Support Pages on Blackboard	The English Support site on Blackboard contains resources to help you with all aspects of language development, including punctuation. If you have activated your university account, you can click on the English Language Support tile via the Student Hub.
Consult books and other resources	The Students' Guide to Writing is a useful resource if you want to improve your confidence with punctuation.
Do some analytical reading specifically to develop your awareness of punctuation.	One of the best ways to improve your sentence construction is to study passages of English academic writing, and observe how writers handle full stops, commas and semicolons.
Proof-read	Check and proof-read your work, and try to make sure you are using correct punctuation.