

Semicolons

SUU Writing Center

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Perhaps the most common semicolon mistake is using the punctuation mark when it is not needed. This tip sheet outlines incorrect and correct semicolon uses. While there may be a few exceptions to the guidelines listed, this chart can be considered quite exhaustive; there are few situations not mentioned here that would warrant inserting semicolons.

Three mistakes that writers often make with semicolons are as follows:

Mistake I: Semicolons are sometimes incorrectly used to introduce quotations or lists. Rather than a semicolon, use a colon instead.

Example of correct use: The popular Cedar City actor has appeared in several Shakespearean Festival productions: *Othello*, *As You Like It*, *Winter's Tale*, and *Romeo and Juliet*.

Mistake II: Semicolons can be incorrectly placed inside quotation marks. They should be placed outside quotation marks.

Example of correct use: High school English teachers often assign the Jamaica Kincaid story "Girl"; the story is both innovative and interesting.

Mistake III: Semicolons can be incorrectly used to join phrases to phrases, clauses to phrases, or phrases to clauses. Each of these cases requires a **comma**, not a semicolon.

Example of correct use: For the love of your family, for the love of your country, for the love of yourself, live up to your dreams. [**Phrase + phrase + phrase + clause=three commas and no semicolons**]

Use Semicolons as Follows:

Link two or more related independent clauses with a semicolon unless they are already joined by a coordinating conjunction (<i>and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet</i>).	Wise men don't need advice; fools don't take it. -Benjamin Franklin
Use a semicolon (instead of a usual comma) to precede a coordinating conjunction when a sharp division between the two independent clauses is desired.	Politicians may refrain from negative campaigning for a time; but when the race gets close, they can't seem to resist trying to dredge up personal dirt to use on their opponent.
Use a semicolon before conjunctive adverbs (<i>therefore, nevertheless, however, instead, thus, then</i>) when they come between independent clauses. Place a comma after it.	Bob Hope started his entertainment career in Vaudeville; however, he made his major mark as a film star and television comic.
Use semicolons to separate items in a series that contain commas or other punctuation. This makes complicated sentences easier to read.	Bob Hope's films include <i>Road to Morocco</i> , which also features Bing Crosby and Dorothy Lamour; <i>The Paleface</i> , a comic western with Jane Russell as Calamity Jane; and <i>The Seven Little Foys</i> , a biography about Vaudeville performer, Eddie Foy, Sr.