Semicolons

The semicolon is used to separate major sentence elements of equal grammatical rank. If you learn the simple rules explained here, you'll rarely go wrong.

1. Semicolons connect two closely related independent clauses.

Independent clauses are series of words that could stand alone as complete sentences. When you have two otherwise complete sentences that you want to connect to form one long sentence, use a semicolon between them.

Example: This could be a complete sentence; this could be another one.

2. Semicolons are used between independent clauses linked with transitional expressions, such as transitional words (besides, also, hence, thus…) and phrases (after all, in fact, as a result, in addition…).

Example: Many corals grow very gradually; in fact, the creation of a coral can take centuries.

However, don't use a semicolon to connect two complete sentences if there's a conjunction between the clauses (and, but, etc.). In that case, use a comma.

Example: This could be a complete sentence, and this could be another one.

Adding that single word, the conjunction "and," means that you must change that semicolon into a comma.

3. A semicolon serves as a “super-comma.”

When you have a series of three or more items that normally would be separated by commas, and each item also contains a comma, use a semicolon between items.

Example: We visited Pago, Western Samoa; Curitiba, Brazil; and St. George, Utah.

Example: The trio’s birthdays are November 10, 1946; December 7, 1947; and October 31, 1950.

4. A semicolon may be used to emphasize a sharp contrast and a firm distinction between clauses joined with a coordinating conjunction.

Example: We hate some persons because we do not know them; and we will not know them because we hate them.

This handout is adapted from University of Alabama Writing Center Website. Only the format has been changed.