**Semicolons**

A Simple Introduction

This handout describes the three uses of the semicolon. For more information about each usage, see *A Pocket Style Manual* in the COWS library of Writing Wisdom and the silly semicolon poster by The Oatmeal, hanging up in the COWS.

1. You can connect two (or more) *related* sentences with semicolons. A semicolon, unlike a period, indicates an key relationship between the two clauses it connects. Perhaps these two clauses are contradictory, parallel, or are co-dependent for clarification of a single idea.

* Bruggs ate toasted walnuts; he got sick.
* Bruggs ate toasted walnuts; he got sick; he died after three weeks of severe stomach cramps.
* Bruggs ate toasted walnuts; he eyed bacon strips in the fridge and fried them up and ate them; he ate hamburger patties and stew; he paid no attention to his gut; he watched TV; he cramped up and died.

2. You can separate items that contain commas in a series.

* Turnbull liked big, green, Granny Smith apples; smallish, greenish Florida oranges; and toasted, disease-free black walnuts.
* We can meet on Friday, April 21; Saturday, April 22; or Monday, April 24.

3. You can connect two or more sentences with a semicolon plus a conjunctive adverb.[[1]](#footnote-1)

* Surpitude liked to eat toasted, disease-free black walnuts; **however**, they always made her sick.
* Brunswik always got sick when she ate any walnuts; **consequently**, she ate no nuts of any kind without bleaching them first in Clorox.

**DON’T** use a semicolon with conjunctions (words like *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *for*, *so* and *yet*).

e.g. I love to hang out with tiny mice; **but** they would rather I left them alone.

Correctly punctuated, this sentence reads: I love to hang out with tiny mice, but they would rather I let them alone. A comma is used here because there’s a *but* separating the two clauses.

“With educated people, I suppose, punctuation is a matter of rule; with me it is a matter of feeling. But I must say I have a great respect for the semi-colon; it’s a useful little chap.” -Abraham Lincoln

1. The **conjunctive adverb** is a word that joins one part of a sentence to another part of a sentence. It also may begin or end a sentence. It often provides a seamless transition from one idea to another and shows a relationship between the two parts of the sentence. (Study.com) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)