

THE SEMI-COLON, YOUR FRIEND

To avoid short choppy sentences and improve the flow of your writing, vary your sentence lengths and structures! You may have heard this kind of advice before, and semi-colons can help you heed it. Perhaps when you tried using a semi-colon, however, it was slashed incorrect with red ink by a teacher. Here are the three basic situations for the correct usage of a semi-colon.

To separate two closely-related complete sentences instead of a conjunction (like *and*, *but*, or)

I went to the store. It was closed.
I went to the store, but it was closed.
I went to the store; it was closed.

Each of these three examples is grammatically correct. The first, however, sounds choppy; a whole paragraph of sentences like that will eventually sound like a beginning reader's lesson. ("See Spot run.") The second sentence is probably the one we would use in most contexts. The third, featuring the semi-colon, has something emphatic or dramatic about it: it lacks the choppiness of the first example with its two complete stops, but it does not make the contrast so pronounced as the "but" does in the second example. It shows the close relation between the two statements but leaves the nature of that relationship implied.

To separate two complete sentences linked with a transitional word or phrase (like *however*, *in fact*)

Many students resist using semi-colons for fear of doing so incorrectly; once its three basic uses are understood, however, the semi-colon will pose little problem.

CAUTION: What lies on either side of the semi-colon, as in the previous examples, needs to be a complete sentence. Here is a case where the semi-colon is used *incorrectly* (what follows it is merely a phrase):

Many students resist using semi-colons for fear of doing so incorrectly; probably because a teacher corrected them in the past.

To separate items in a series when the items themselves already contain commas

*America's favorites cartoon family, *The Simpsons*, includes Homer, the oafish but loving father who tries to be a good dad in spite of himself; Marge, the worrisome but loving mother with the blue beehive hair-do; Lisa, the brainy older sister; Maggie, the pacifier-sucking baby; and of course, Bart, the class-clown, troublemaker and rebel without a cause.*