MAKING SENSE OF SEMICOLONS

The semicolon is a useful form of punctuation for connecting closely-related ideas in a sentence, usually in the form of independent clauses. It allows the reader to identify ideas or claims that are connected to each other.

How to Use Semicolons

There are a number of ways to use a semicolon grammatically; stylistically, however, it is most effective when used sparingly to perform the following tasks:

1. Connect two independent clauses of equal grammatical rank - OR -
2. Separate items in complicated lists

Semicolons and Two Independent Clauses with No Transitions

A semicolon is used to link two independent clauses when the ideas in the two clauses are closely related, and there is no coordinating conjunction (and, or, but).

e.g., Some students write down everything said in class¹; others take down only the key points².

   1 Independent clause
   2 Independent clause

Semicolons and Two Independent Clauses with Transitions

A semicolon is used between two independent clauses that are linked by a transition word or expression.

e.g., Mark took a French course during the summer¹; however², at the end of the course, he still couldn’t understand French³.

   1 Independent clause
   2 Transition word
   3 Independent clause

A transition word or expression links words, phrases, or clauses to connect ideas smoothly.

e.g., for example, as a result, in addition, in fact, on the contrary, however, similarly, consequently
Semicolons and Complex Lists

A semicolon is used between items in a complex list or series, especially when the items already contain commas. The semicolon allows the reader to recognize major groupings of words.

e.g., Students in this course will study the historical, digital, and economic origins of Maker Culture 1; the practical, philosophical, and gender resistance to the movement 2; and the technological and political ramifications others might not have considered 3.

1 First in list: topic of study #1
2 Second in list: topic of study #2
3 Third in list: topic of study #3

Except for lists, asking “could I put a period in place of the semicolon?” is an easy way to identify whether your semicolon use is appropriate. If the answer is “yes,” you are probably using it correctly.