The Semicolon

The semicolon is used between major sentence elements of equal grammatical rank. While semicolons certainly are useful tools, be careful not to overuse them as a means of revising comma splices.

1. Use a semicolon between closely related independent clauses not joined by a coordinating conjunction: and, or, but, nor, for, so, yet, etc.

When I was a boy, I was told that anybody could become President; I’m beginning to believe it. – Clarence Darrow

2. Use a semicolon between independent clauses linked with a conjunctive adverb or transitional words and phrases: accordingly, also, besides, certainly, finally, however, after all, as a result, even so, for example, in conclusion, in fact, on the other hand, etc.

I loved Star Wars when I was little; however, my family laughed at me when I thought that R2-D2’s first name was Arthur.

When finals are over, everybody sports a silly grin; for example, that mean-faced boy actually cracked a joke when he left his last exam!

3. Use a semicolon between items in a series containing internal punctuation.

Some of my favorite places are San Francisco, California; Boston, Massachusetts; and Sedona, Arizona.

Avoid These Common Misuses of the Semicolon

1. Between a subordinate clause and the rest of the sentence.
   Unless you bother to work these problems out; , passing the exam will be impossible.

2. Between an appositive and the word it refers to.
   Another if mom’s favorite dishes is our country’s favorite dessert; , good old American pie.

3. To introduce a list (use a colon instead – See Colon handout)
   My favorite movies are mostly action-adventure; : Speed, The Hunt for Red October, Patriot Games, and The Fugitive.

4. Between independent clauses joined by and, but, or, nor, for, so, or yet.
   I wanted to see a movie this evening; , but I realized I had far too much homework to do.

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