

# MPC English & Study Skills Center

## Semicolons ( ; ) and Colons ( : )

### Semicolons (;)

#### Rule 1

**Use a semicolon between two independent clauses of a compound sentence when they are not joined by a conjunction.** These sentences must be related in content.

I came; I conquered.  
Jake went to the dance; he partied all evening.  
Sara bought a new car; she promptly wrecked it.

#### Rule 2

**Use a semicolon between the two independent clauses of a compound sentence joined by a coordinating conjunction when there are other commas in the sentence.** If there is only one extra comma or no possibility of confusion, a comma may be used before the conjunction, but it is better to use a semicolon.

**Note:** There are seven **coordinating conjunctions**: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so.

The reporters went to Mr. Keely, who was the chairman of the finance committee; **and** he, in particular, was very cooperative.

Mary, who is my friend, is very stubborn; **but** her brother, fortunately, is just the opposite.

#### Rule 3

**Use a semicolon before a conjunctive adverb and a comma after the conjunctive adverb.**

**Note:** There are many conjunctive adverbs, but some examples are *moreover*, *however*, *nevertheless*, *then*, *therefore*, and *on the other hand*.

He went home; **however**, he was very late.  
I saw her; **then**, I got frightened and ran away.  
I studied very hard; **moreover**, I got a good grade.  
New clothes are always fun; **on the other hand**, old clothes are comfortable.

## Rule 4

**Use a semicolon to separate equal phrases or clauses that contain internal commas.** For example, in a list, separate each item from its description with a comma, and then separate the items with their descriptions with a semicolon.

**Mr. Kuite**, a banker; **Mrs. Ballard**, an office manager; **and Mr. Locke**, a grocery chain executive, spoke to us yesterday.

He won a million dollars and went shopping. He bought a **car**, red and flashy; **a boat**, big and expensive; **and a motorcycle**, big and dangerous.

I went with **Jane**, who is from New York; **Susan**, who is from Pennsylvania; **and Jason**, who is from Indiana.

## Colons (:)

**Colons** may be used to connect a list to a complete sentence.

### Example:

For my trip, I have to remember to pack certain **items**: a sweater, a pair of earplugs, and my high blood pressure medication.

I try to follow my Mother's **advice**: wash my hands, brush my teeth, and always say "Please" and "Thank you."

**Note:** Do not use a colon to connect a list to a fragment. If you see a verb immediately before the colon, the colon is not needed and, in fact, would be incorrect.

*fragment*

**Milla's bag contains:** an apple, a brush, and a pack of gum. (Incorrect)

Milla's bag contains an apple, a brush, and a pack of gum. (Correct—no colon)

*fragment*

**My favorite snacks are:** bananas, yogurt, and cookies. (Incorrect)

My favorite snacks are bananas, yogurt, and cookies. (Correct—no colon)

**Warning:** Do not use a semicolon before a list!

Dan couldn't decide what to have for **dinner**; lasagna or a steak. (Incorrect)

Dan couldn't decide what to have for **dinner**: lasagna or a steak. (Correct)