

Misuses of Semicolon and Colon

SEMICOLON USE: Semicolons (;) are used between independent clauses that are not joined with a coordinating conjunction. Semicolons should join independent clauses that are of equal grammatical weight. The semicolon can also be used between items in a series containing internal punctuation.

EXERCISE: ARE THESE SEMICOLON USED CORRECTLY OR INCORRECTLY? WHY?

1. The company scheduled interviews with three candidates; but only one candidate had taken courses in change management.
This semicolon is used:
A. Correctly
B. Incorrectly

Why?
2. The cow is brown; the sheep is old and blind and shaky, and I think he might die soon.
This semicolon is used:
A. Correctly
B. Incorrectly

Why?
3. While some students prefer to take notes on their laptops; I find writing notes in a notebook to be more helpful.
This semicolon is used:
A. Correctly
B. Incorrectly

Why?

HAVING TROUBLE? Most semicolon errors involve either independent clause errors or errors involving equal grammatical weight. Which one do you need help with? Before we explore independent clauses, let's explore the idea of "equal grammatical weight."

Equal Grammatical Weight

DEFINITION: Equal grammatical weight means that two clauses are relatively equal in length and equal in importance. Look at the example below.

EXAMPLE OF UNEQUAL GRAMMATICAL WEIGHT:

Lydia is spry; even though she is 93 years old, she still walks to the coffee shop every morning and visits the animal shelter every Saturday.

EXAMPLE OF EQUAL GRAMMATICAL WEIGHT:

Lydia is spry; she is active for her age.

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Comment [1]: A **coordinating conjunction** is a conjunction that connects two identically constructed or syntactically equal grammatical elements. Use the acronym FANBOYS to remember coordinating conjunctions: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.

Understanding Independent Clauses

DEFINITION: A clause contains a subject and a verb, but not all clauses can stand alone. An independent clause contains a subject and a verb and can stand alone as a sentence.

EXAMPLE: Inez had a lovely wedding.

A dependent clause contains a subject and a verb and begins with a subordinating conjunction (although, even though, whenever, before, once, since, etc.). Dependent clauses cannot stand alone and are not complete sentences.

EXAMPLE: Even though her flowers arrived late...

IDENTIFY WHICH CLAUSES ARE INDEPENDENT AND WHICH ARE DEPENDENT:

1. She is a hardworking individual.
A. Independent
B. Dependent
2. Although we never confirmed the date.
A. Independent
B. Dependent
3. Once the media picks up on this story.
A. Independent
B. Dependent

REMEMBER: ONLY INDEPENDENT CLAUSES CAN BE JOINED WITH SEMICOLONS.

HAVING TROUBLE? In order to identify independent clauses, you first need to be able to identify subjects and verbs.

Identifying Subjects and Verbs

DEFINITION: Sentences are made up of subjects and verbs. Nearly every sentence must have both a subject and a verb to be complete.

THE SUBJECT OF THE SENTENCE IS THE PERSON, PLACE, THING, OR IDEA THAT IS DOING OR BEING SOMETHING.

THE SUBJECTS IN THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES ARE UNDERLINED:

My mother won the lottery.

After midnight, he falls asleep.

My favorite animal is the polar bear.

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Comment [2]: A **subordinating conjunction** makes one linguistic unit an element of another unit. When a clause begins with a subordinating conjunction, the clause cannot stand on its own and needs to be connected to an independent clause to form a complete sentence.

UNDERLINE THE SUBJECTS IN THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES:

Otherwise, the report was detailed and helpful.

The banker wore a fashionable vest.

Worried about finding employment, Sarah wondered if she should admit that she had once committed a felony.

My kind grandfather gave me an important compliment.

Manuel's friends Jenny and Lloyd are attending my birthday party, too.

Once upon a time, dinosaurs roamed the Earth.

When Michelle returned to the campground, her boyfriend was cleaning the fish he had just caught.

Popcorn is my favorite snack.

Most of his friends have plans for after graduation.

After they crossed the finish line, the group of friends hugged each other and cheered.

No one likes exploring the wilderness without the proper equipment.

The astronaut asked me on a date, but I declined.

THE VERB DESCRIBES THE ACTION OR STATE OF BEING TAKEN BY THE SUBJECT.

THE VERBS THAT MODIFY THE SUBJECTS ARE BOLDED:

My mother **won** the lottery.

After midnight, he **falls** asleep.

My favorite animal **is** the polar bear.

CIRCLE THE VERBS IN THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES:

Who is Barbara's mother?

Amanda must have heard us talking because she began walking toward us.

Some sports fans argue that baseball is good for the soul.

However, he never specified when we would meet.

Reflecting on my life in high school embarrasses me.

In my dream last night, I travelled to Paris, France.

He often watched television at night.

Why should students pay the consequences for legislators' irresponsible decisions?

Some mammals sleep in cavers, waking after months to feed and to breed.

While meandering through the valley, I encountered a snake.

Irritated, the professor asked her students to put away their cell phones.

"Please hurry," Sarah added.

Using Colons

COLON USE: A colon (:) can be used after an independent clause to direct readers' attention to a list, an appositive, a quotation, or an explanation embedded in an independent clause.

A LIST: Though she was tired, Sam's had to visit the following locations before 8:00 p.m.: the grocery store, the veterinarian's office, and the drycleaner.

AN APPOSITIVE: His mother usually uses two words to describe her son: brilliant and lazy.

A QUOTATION: When placed in a moral dilemma, I remember Mark Twain's words: "Go to heaven for the climate, hell for the company."

EXPLANATION: My knee is throbbing: I slipped on the ice this morning.

EXERCISES: DO THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES USE COLONS CORRECTLY OR INCORRECTLY? WHY?

1. David usually eats Israeli couscous: a large, plump grain.

This colon is used:

- A. Correctly
- B. Incorrectly

Why?

2. The University's motto is Goethe's last words: "Light! More light!"

This colon is used:

- A. Correctly
- B. Incorrectly

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Comment [3]: An **appositive** is a noun or noun phrase that renames a nearby noun or pronoun. In the example to the left, "brilliant and lazy" rename "two words."

Why?

3. You should visit the doctor soon: Your cough is sounding worse and worse.

This colon is used:

- A. Correctly
- B. Incorrectly

Why?

PRACTICE: Revise the following sentences to ensure that the semicolons and colons are used correctly.

1. The media likes to portray my generation as lazy; although polls show that we work as hard as the twentysomethings before us.
2. The heart's two pumps each consist of: an upper chamber, or atrium, and a lower chamber, or ventricle.
3. The NCAA regulates college athletic teams, including: basketball, baseball, softball, and football.
4. Some birds are flightless; emus, penguins, and ostriches.
5. When the women's track team won the national meet last Saturday; the president decided to declare a university-wide holiday.
6. The athletes celebrated by wearing their team colors for a week: The administrators, in contrast, celebrated by decorating the student center, but the student center only stayed decorated for the afternoon.
7. The final exam will be administered on Saturday at nine in the morning; so please remember to arrive early and to bring your calculators.
8. Last semester, exam week was more stressful than in should have been, for example: I lost my cell phone, locked my keys in my car, and fell and broke my hand.
9. Despite her protestations; Maria loves bad television.
10. Alternatively: Margot could have planted to clue in the woodshed while Nick was at work.