



## Section Three: Writing Research

### It's a stoplight; it's a spring; it's a semicolon!

*Amy Newday*

I hate grammar! I hate punctuation! Okay, that's not entirely true. As a poet, I spend a lot of time fiddling with punctuation and word choices, trying to get the words and symbols in exactly the right places to convey my meaning. But explain comma rules? Diagram a sentence? I don't even want to think about it. Recently in fact, I reviewed a friend's paper and told him confidently that he was using semicolons incorrectly. The phrases on each side of a semicolon had to be able to stand alone, I said, otherwise you should use a comma. Imagine my embarrassment when, in doing research for this article, I found this sentence: "Use semicolons to separate items in a series when there's already a comma in one or more of the items" (O'Conner 139). Oops, that was exactly what my friend was doing.

For years I never used semicolons because I wasn't really sure what they were for. Why take chances on a semicolon when I could just use a period and have two sentences I was pretty sure were correct? Even now, I feel anxiety around semicolons and rarely use them. But I know that learning to use them effectively could help me add variety and



At age seven, Amy Newday wrote her first poem for her pet Holstein calf, Misty. Since then she has written in many different genres, for both business and pleasure. Currently, she's pursuing her MFA in poetry at Western Michigan University and teaching in WMU's First-Year Writing program. She lives in an old

house in the country with an old dog, a young cat, and the occasional milk snake. If she's not inside writing, you might find her barefoot in her garden, where she grows monstrously delicious tomatoes and ruffled red lettuce.

complexity to my sentences, which could help me communicate more successfully.

In the past, my approach to grammar and punctuation has been to go with “what sounds right.” Sometimes my “sounds right” approach has resulted in effective writing; sometimes it hasn’t. (Did I use the semicolon correctly here? I’m not sure. I think my meaning is clear, but even if I’m getting my point across, I feel nervous. I don’t want my readers to think I’m an idiot who can’t use punctuation correctly.) Recently, I decided that I needed a new approach. Perhaps if I learned some semicolon rules, I could use them without fear of embarrassing myself.

I have a few friends who teach English, so I asked them for suggestions. One told me that she teaches her students to proof-read by ear as they read their work aloud. She has them listen to where they pause in their reading to figure out where punctuation like commas, semicolons, and periods should go. But another teacher told me that punctuating by ear doesn’t work. According to her, it is necessary to look at sentence structure and meaning to figure out where to put punctuation. Hmm. I could see how both methods could be useful, but which one was right? I needed a more definitive solution to my semicolon dilemma. I went to the library, checked out several grammar handbooks and dove into the semicolon sections.

*The Right Handbook* gave me a historical perspective on punctuation:

Back in the sixteenth century, when printers first became interested in formulating rules about the use of various punctuation marks so that the printing industry would have some standards, one authority compared punctuation marks to symbols used in music. He equated a period with a full rest, a colon with a three-quarters rest, a semicolon with a half rest, and a comma with a quarter rest (Belanoff 97).

So that would fit with the idea of punctuating by ear, and putting semicolons in places where you pause longer than a comma but shorter than a period. But don’t different people have different speech patterns? Wouldn’t people pause in different places or for different lengths of time when reading the same passage? How can I tell whether my pauses are the correct ones?

Self-proclaimed grammar stickler Lynne Truss disagrees with this system entirely. She writes,

Expectation is what these stops are about; expectation and elastic energy. Like internal springs, they propel you forward in a sentence towards more information, and the essential difference between them is that while the semicolon lightly propels you in any direction related to the foregoing (“Whee! Surprise me!”), the colon nudges you along lines already subtly laid down (144).

Expectation and elastic energy, huh? I like the idea of the semicolon as a propellant, almost like an arrow pointing from one phrase to the next.

I read on and found another semicolon metaphor in Patricia O'Conner's *Woe is I*: "If a comma is a yellow light and a period is a red light, the semicolon is a flashing red—one of those lights you drive through after a brief pause" (139). So maybe I can think of the semicolon as a signal to my reader to pause, look around, and then push forward into the next phrase. How do I determine where to put those flashing red lights, though? I don't want my reader to have to stop at every street corner.

I turned to *Pinckert's Practical Grammar*:

People think of it as a kind of heavy comma, but that's all wrong—it's a period. Think of it as a light period. It definitely represents the period sound. The difference between the semicolon and the period is that after the semicolon you don't pause as long as after the period (Pinckert 64).

So, the semicolon is a musical rest, an internal spring, a flashing red light, and—a period? I was not feeling less confused or more confident in my ability to use semicolons correctly. I pulled out my laptop, googled "semicolon," and found myself at Purdue University's Online Writing Lab. Their website listed three basic ways to use semicolons and gave examples:

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“Use a semicolon to join 2 independent clauses when the second clause restates the first or when the two clauses are of equal emphasis.

Road construction in Dallas has hindered travel around town; streets have become covered with bulldozers, trucks, and cones.

Use a semicolon to join 2 independent clauses when the second clause begins with a conjunctive adverb (however, therefore, moreover, furthermore, thus, meanwhile, nonetheless, otherwise) or a transition (in fact, for example, that is, for instance, in addition, in other words, on the other hand, even so).

Terrorism in the United States has become a recent concern; in fact, the concern for America’s safety has led to an awareness of global terrorism.

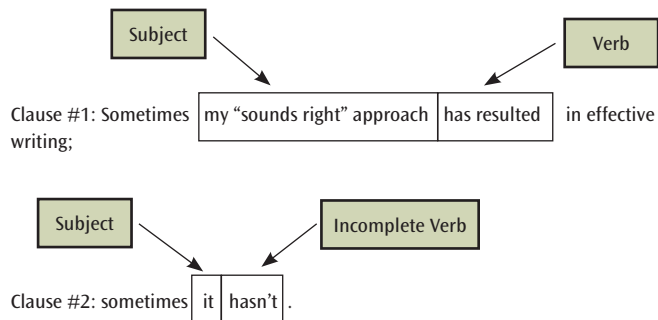
Use a semicolon to join elements of a series when individual items of the series already include commas.

Recent sites of the Olympic Games include Athens, Greece; Salt Lake City, Utah; Sydney, Australia; Nagano, Japan.”

—From the Purdue Online Writing Lab, <<http://owl.english.purdue.edu>>

When I reviewed the grammar handbooks, they all seemed to agree with these basic rules. But, embarrassing as it is to admit, I wasn’t entirely sure what they meant by an “independent clause.” To my relief, the Purdue OWL offered a definition: “a clause that has a subject and a verb and can stand alone; a complete sentence.” Oh, so the words on each side of the semicolon should be able to form a complete sentence—that I can understand! Let me take another look at the sentence in which I used a semicolon in the second paragraph of this article:

Sentence: Sometimes my “sounds right” approach has resulted in effective writing; sometimes it hasn’t.



Well, my first clause could be a complete sentence because it has a subject and a verb and would make sense if I read it by itself. But the verb in my second clause is incomplete. There's nothing in that clause to tell me what "hasn't" is referring to and it wouldn't make sense if it wasn't connected to the first clause. So I guess it would be more correct if I wrote: "Sometimes my "sounds right" approach has resulted in effective writing; I've also made embarrassing mistakes using this method." Both of those clauses could stand alone, but the sentence sounds kind of stiff. I don't know that I've made my meaning any clearer by making the sentence technically grammatical. Just as it can be effective to use sentence fragments sometimes, perhaps it can be okay to use fragmented clauses with semicolons, as long as my meaning comes across clearly. Even Truss the grammar stickler does this, in the first sentence of the passage I quoted earlier.

The other use of a semicolon mentioned in the Purdue OWL and in the handbooks is to manage lists in long sentences that get unwieldy. In my friend's paper, he was trying to describe all of the teaching experiences that he'd had in one long sentence. I don't remember the exact wording of his sentence, so I'll make one up: "The diversity of my teaching experience includes teaching yoga, meditation, and movement therapy to senior citizens; teaching English to children, teenagers, and construction workers in Thailand; giving physics presentations and teaching electronics classes in elementary school classrooms across the Eastern United States; and teaching woodworking to inner city youth." Wow, that's quite a sentence. Let me break it down:

Clause #1: The diversity of my teaching experience includes teaching yoga, meditation, and movement therapy to senior citizens;

- This clause introduces the subject of the sentence ("The diversity of my teaching experience") and the verb ("includes"). Then, it begins to describe the different types of teaching the author has done with a list, separated by commas, of the subjects he's taught to senior citizens.

Clause #2: teaching English to children, teenagers, and construction workers in Thailand;

- This clause encompasses all of the author's teaching in Thailand.

Clause #3: giving physics presentations and teaching electronics classes in elementary school classrooms across the Eastern United States;

- This clause describes the types of programs and classes the author has given in US elementary schools.

Clause #4: and teaching woodworking to inner city youth.

- Finally, this last clause describes the author's experience working with inner city youth.

Each clause, set apart by semicolons, describes a different aspect of the author's teaching experience. I do see how it is useful to use semicolons to separate each clause so that it is clear what the author taught to whom, and where. If commas were used in between clauses, this could become confusing.

I'm feeling more comfortable around the semicolon now that I've done some research and practiced a bit; however, I think it will take more practice before I can use it with complete confidence, without double-checking my sentences and referring back to the grammar handbooks. I'm going to play with it though; I'm feeling excited about experimenting with this piece of punctuation and about the new kinds of sentences I'll be able to create using it.

### References

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