

A Dash of Style

Chapter Three: The Semicolon (The Bridge)

by Noah Lukeman

“When a writer is taking pains to write for his reader rather than to impress him, semicolons can seem like the grammarian’s happiest invention.”

—John Trimble, *Writing With Style*

Between the comma and the period you’ll find the semicolon. Pausing more strongly than the comma, yet dividing more weakly than the period, it is a mediator. The semicolon does not have as many functions as the comma, yet it has more than the period. As Eric Partridge says in *You Have a Point There*, “By its very form (;) [the semicolon] betrays its dual nature: it is both period and comma.” As such, it is best thought of as a bridge between two worlds.

The primary function of the semicolon is to connect two complete (thematically similar) sentences, thereby making them one. But when and how to do that is open to interpretation. The semicolon has been overused (Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*) and questionably used (Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*) throughout its existence, and has been the subject of endless debate. Compounding the debate is the fact that, grammatically, the semicolon is never necessary; two short sentences can always coexist without being connected. Artistically, though, the semicolon opens a world of possibilities, and can lend a huge impact. In this sense, it is the punctuation mark best suited for creative writers.

The semicolon is a powerful tool in the writer’s arsenal. It is probably the most elegant of all forms of punctuation (it has been dubbed “a compliment from the writer to the reader”), and can offer an excellent solution to balancing sentence length and rhythm. Yet, ironically, it is often overlooked and underused by writers today. So in this chapter we’ll focus on how—and why—to use it. We’ll learn what we gain from its presence, and what we lose when we don’t invite it into the symphony of punctuation.

HOW TO USE IT

The first thing to realize is that one could always make a case for not using a semicolon. As an unnecessary form of punctuation, as the luxury item in the shop, we must ask ourselves: why use it at all?

We use the semicolon for the same reason we replace cement floors with marble: cement floors are equally functional but not as elegant, not as aesthetically pleasing as marble. The semicolon elevates punctuation from the utilitarian (from punctuation that works) to the luxurious (to punctuation that transcends). Business memos do not need semicolons. Creative writers do.

The semicolon’s functions are all essentially creative, and are connected with a writer’s sensibility. Some ways to use it:

- To connect two closely-related sentences. Sometimes two (or more) sentences are so closely related that you don’t want the separation of a period, yet they are also so independent that they need stronger separation than a comma. Consider:

He ran with his shirt over his head. He had forgotten his umbrella once again.

Grammatically, the above is correct. Yet these two thoughts are so closely linked that they don’t feel quite right standing on their own. Yet a comma won’t do, since they are each complete sentences:

He ran with his shirt over his head, he had forgotten his umbrella once again.

Thus, we need the semicolon:

He ran with his shirt over his head; he had forgotten his umbrella once again.

The semicolon lends an appropriate feeling of connection, while allowing each clause its independence. It functions in a position where both the period and comma cannot. Notice how, by connecting these two sentences with a semicolon, each sentence helps explain the other. “He ran with his shirt over his head” is technically complete and correct, yet is somewhat cryptic on its own. The subsequent sentence brings it to life.

Another example:

The wind knocked over two trees in my street alone. The clean-up operation would be atrocious. Once again a comma won't do, as these clauses are too independent:

The wind knocked over two trees in my street alone, the clean-up operation would be atrocious. Thus, the semicolon:

The wind knocked over two trees in my street alone; the clean-up operation would be atrocious. You'll notice that the first example is grammatically acceptable. Yet adding a semicolon extends the thought, and allows a richer overall sentence.

· The semicolon can enhance word economy, since its appearance often allows surrounding words to be cut. For example:

She couldn't dance in her favorite ballroom because it was being renovated.

She couldn't dance in her favorite ballroom; it was being renovated.

As John Trimble says in *Writing With Style*, “The semicolon is efficient: it allows you to eliminate most of those conjunctions or prepositions that are obligatory with the comma—words like whereas, because, for, or, but while, and.”

Edgar Allan Poe used the semicolon often and with great skill. Consider this excerpt from his story “The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall”:

His feet, of course, could not be seen at all. His hands were enormously large. His hair was gray, and collected into a queue behind. His nose was prodigiously long, crooked, and inflammatory; his eyes full, brilliant, and acute; his chin and cheeks, although wrinkled with age, were broad, puffy, and double; but of ears of any kind there was not a semblance to be discovered upon any portion of his head.

The semicolons here are used well not only sentence to sentence but also in the context of the paragraph. Poe begins with complete, simple sentences, using only commas and periods, as he describes the man's feet, hands, and hair. But as he switches to describing the man's face, he switches to semicolons. This is not by chance. The pace increases as he does, as if he's revving up in his description of this man, racing toward a conclusion. It enables us to take in this man's entire face at once, as one grand unit, as opposed to the feet, hands, and hair, which are given their own sentences.

Here's another example, perhaps one of the most famous in literature. This comes from the opening paragraph of Melville's *Moby Dick*. Melville relied heavily on the semicolon to create *Moby*

Dick, and there has been some debate over whether he used it properly or not. Some of his usages are certainly questionable. But this one is not:

Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.

This single sentence encapsulates the entire rationale behind the book, behind "Ishmael's" taking the adventure he does. Melville could have used commas here instead, but if he had, the pauses would not have been as long, and the reader wouldn't have had the opportunity to digest each thought. Or he could have, alternatively, with minor word adjustments, used periods; but doing so would have made the reader pause too long, and not digest all of this as a single idea. Semicolons allowed the reader to pause and also created tension, capturing 'Ishmael's' own tension, his own feeling of building restlessness and need to get on board a ship.

"Sometimes you get a glimpse of a semicolon coming, a few lines farther on, and it is like climbing a steep path through woods and seeing a wooden bench just at a bend in the road ahead, a place where you can expect to sit for a moment, catching your breath." --Lewis Thomas
