

Understanding the Use of Semicolons in Academic Writing

A Guide for Students

Introduction

The semicolon (;) is a punctuation mark that is often misunderstood and underused in academic writing. It serves a unique purpose in connecting ideas and enhancing the readability of complex sentences. This handout will explain what a semicolon is, when it should be used, and provide examples and practice sentences to help you master its use.

What is a Semicolon?

A semicolon is a punctuation mark that looks like a period above a comma (;). It is used to link closely related ideas in a sentence and to separate items in a complex list. Unlike a comma, which indicates a brief pause, or a period, which indicates a full stop, a semicolon creates a stronger connection between ideas than a comma but less finality than a period.

When to Use a Semicolon

1. Linking Independent Clauses

A semicolon can be used to connect two independent clauses that are closely related in thought but could stand alone as separate sentences. This helps to show a clear relationship between the ideas without using a conjunction (e.g., and, but, or).

Example:

The research was inconclusive; more studies are needed to determine the true effects.

2. With Conjunctive Adverbs

When using conjunctive adverbs (e.g., however, therefore, moreover, consequently) to link two independent clauses, a semicolon is placed before the conjunctive adverb, and a comma follows it.

Example:

The experiment yielded significant results; however, further testing is required to confirm the findings.

3. Complex Lists

In lists where the items themselves contain commas, semicolons are used to separate the items in order to avoid confusion and ensure clarity.

Example:

The conference had attendees from Paris, France; Berlin, Germany; Tokyo, Japan; and Sydney, Australia.

Practice Sentences

Use semicolons to correct the following sentences.

1. The study was completed on time however, the results were not as expected.
2. The committee members included Dr. Smith, the chairperson, Dr. Jones, the secretary, and Dr. Lee, the treasurer.
3. She prefers to study in the morning I, on the other hand, prefer to study at night.

Conclusion

Mastering the use of semicolons can greatly enhance your academic writing by allowing you to connect ideas more clearly and effectively. Remember to use semicolons to link closely related independent clauses, with conjunctive adverbs, and to separate items in complex lists. Practice these guidelines, and soon you'll be able to use semicolons with confidence in your writing.