The Semicolon

A semicolon (;) is a punctuation mark used between two independent clauses. Semicolons connect independent clauses only when the clauses are closely related in meaning and are not joined by a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). There should not be a dependent clause on either side of the semicolon. Remember, a dependent clause is a group of words that has a subject and predicate but cannot stand on its own (For example: While Lisa was reading). On the other hand, an independent clause is a group of words with a subject and predicate that can stand on its own (For example: Lisa is reading).

**Rule 1:** Use a semicolon between two independent clauses that are closely related in meaning.

- **Wrong:** Going to the circus is fun; I went to the beach. *(clauses are not related in meaning)*
- **Correct:** The weather was warm and sunny; I went to the beach. *(use two independent clauses that relate to one another)*

**Rule 2:** Do not use a semicolon to link a dependent clause to an independent clause.

- **Wrong:** When I went to the library; I checked out books for my research project. *(dependent clause on left side of semicolon)*
- **Correct:** When I went to the library, I checked out books for my research project. *(fix by replacing semicolon with comma)*

**Rule 3:** Use a semicolon before conjunctive adverbs (however, otherwise, therefore, similarly, hence, on the other hand, then, consequently, also, thus -- remember the acronym HOTSHOT CAT) when they connect two independent clauses.

- **Wrong:** Lisa will bring the napkins, paper plates, and silverware to the picnic however, Chris will not bring anything. *(there is no punctuation before the conjunctive adverb)*
- **Correct:** Lisa will bring the napkins, paper plates, and silverware to the picnic; however, Chris will not bring anything. *(semicolon before the conjunctive adverb)*
**Rule 4:** Generally, do not use a semicolon before a coordinating conjunction that connects two independent clauses.

- **Wrong:** I like to eat seafood; but my husband prefers Italian. *(should not be a semicolon before the word “but”)*
- **Correct:** I like to eat seafood, but my husband prefers Italian. *(fix by replacing semicolon with comma)*

**Rule 5:** When listing a series of items in which one or more contain commas, use semicolons to break them apart.

- **Wrong:** I visited three cities: New York, New York, Dallas, Texas, and Chicago, Illinois. *(there are commas within the series of items which may cause confusion)*
- **Correct:** I visited three cities: New York, New York; Dallas, Texas; and Chicago, Illinois. *(fix by using a semicolon to break apart the items in the series)*