



I. Semicolons (;) are used to:

1. Join independent clauses

He was pleased beyond words; today his only son graduated.

The mistletoe was hanging from the ceiling; Mary and Pete were standing under it.

2. Connect independent clauses with a conjunctive adverb

He refused to get over his history teacher; however, Cynthia in homeroom was much cuter.

He stole because he didn't know how to do anything else; besides, everyone made it too easy and he wanted to enjoy the money without having to work for it first.

3. Link independent clauses with a transitional expression

He left his tooth under his pillow; as a result, when he woke up, there was a quarter under his pillow.

She was the worst cherry farmer in these parts; even so, she still made the best cherry pie.

4. Avoid confusion in independent clauses where commas are already used

I've lived in Santiago, Panama; and I'm going to live in Delhi, India, and Jiamusi, China, next year.

The cruise included pricy extended excursions to Katakolon, Greece; Kusadasi, Turkey; Messina, Italy; and Dubrovnik, Croatia.

5. Fix comma splices

The students are reading, the teacher is grading.

vs.

The students are reading; the teacher is grading.

Independent clauses are word groups with a subject and a verb that can stand alone as sentences; they express complete thoughts.

Conjunctive adverbs show how two independent clauses relate.

Conjunctive adverbs:
accordingly, besides, consequently, finally, however, instead, nevertheless, now, still, otherwise, therefore, and thus.

Transitional expressions smooth the shift from one idea to another in an author's train of thought, which helps readers understand how ideas relate.

Transitional expressions:
For example, for instance, of course, in spite of, as a consequence, nearby, and on the whole

Comma splices happen when you join two independent clauses with a comma, which isn't a punctuation mark strong enough for the job. Semicolons, periods, or coordinating conjunctions should be used instead.

II. Colons (:)

Colons clarify your writing, provide emphasis for more important parts of your papers, and make your papers more professional. Note that the group of words that comes before a colon should be able to stand alone as a sentence.

1. Use a colon to introduce a list

*I had a craving for three things: peanut butter, cheese and celery.
Before finals, she had two assignments to finish: a 12-page paper and a handout.*

2. Use a colon to introduce a quotation

Lincoln started the Gettysburg Address with these famous words: "Four score and seven years ago."

3. Use a colon to introduce a formal appositive, or a noun that renames another noun right beside it.

She went to the Happiest Place on Earth: Disneyland.

4. Use a colon to clarify a previous statement

At the end of her presentation, she summarized her main point: llamas are the best animals in the world.

5. Use a colon to set off notes and warning statements

*Note: Names have been changed to protect the identities of certain individuals.
Caution: This stunt has been performed by trained professionals. Do not attempt this at home.*

III. Dashes

Dashes are an interesting weapon to include in your punctuation arsenal. There should be no spaces before or after a dash.

Dashes (—) should not be confused with hyphens (-).

Hyphens are used to join words or word groups:

Today was a red-letter day.

Dashes, however, are used to separate ideas, words or word groups:

Today—though a Monday—turned out to be spectacular.

Dashes are used to indicate emphasis, interruption, or an abrupt change of thought. They can replace semicolons, colons, parentheses, and commas.

Sentence Example	Usage
<i>Against all odds, Stan—the unluckiest man alive—won the lottery.</i>	Parentheses or commas could also set off “the unluckiest man alive” because that statement is not necessary to have in the sentence. The dash is emphasizing how unlucky he is.
<i>She loved only three things—swimming, sleeping, and eating cake.</i>	A colon could replace the dash, as the first sentence is introducing a list. The dash emphasizes that she loves only these things.
<i>I buy all the food—she eats all the food.</i>	A semicolon could replace the dash because both statements are complete sentences. The dash emphasizes the contrast between the two statements.
<i>I need you to go—oh, wait, nevermind.</i>	The dash indicates an abrupt change of thought.

Revised March 2010

Sources:

Working with Words by Brooks, Pinson, and Wilson. 6th edition.

The Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL)

Working With Words, “Colons”, p. 182–183

Chicago Manual of Style Online, “Use of a Colon”, 6.63