

When Do You Use the Semicolon?

The Question Everyone Is Asking!

Students often have problems with that tricky piece of punctuation, the semicolon. This is probably because they have seen it used so many different ways. However, here are some relatively easy guidelines to follow when you are trying to decide whether or not to use a semicolon.

Rule #1

Use a semicolon to join together two independent clauses.

John is not going to the contest this year; he has too much school work to make up.

Notice that both of the clauses in this sentence are independent clauses. This means that they require either a semicolon or conjunction to join them together into a single sentence.

Use a semicolon before an special kind of conjunction known as an *adverbial* conjunction. These are listed below:

also
consequently
furthermore

however
likewise
moreover

nevertheless
otherwise
rather

therefore
then
thus

These words can function in different ways, but one of the tasks they do perform is to join together independent clauses. When they are used to join independent clauses, they require a semicolon in front of them and a comma after.

John is not going to the contest this year; however, he is not too disappointed about it.

Again, notice that the two clauses that are being joined by the conjunction *however* are both independent.



A word of warning!!!

Sometimes these conjunctions are used for other purposes. For example, look at the following sentence:

John, however, is not going to the contest this year.

In this sentence, *however* is not being used to combine two independent clauses. Instead, it is being used as an “interruption” of sorts, inserted into a single sentence. When the conjunction is being used this way, it is set off with [commas](#).