



# The Misnamed Semicolon



## It's More Like Half Comma, Half Period

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- ♣ The main function of the semicolon is to join two independent statements that are closely related:
  - He got a good buy on his car; the former owner had to leave town and needed to sell quickly.
- ♣ Be sure that there are complete statements on each side of the semicolon. Don't write:
  - He got a good buy on his car; the former owner being in a hurry to leave town.
- ♣ Sometimes a conjunctive adverb (a word like *consequently*, *however*, *therefore*, etc.) connects the two statements. The semicolon should precede this connecting word:
  - John had the highest average of his class; consequently, he received a scholarship to Harvard.
  - The doctor declared her insane; however, we disagreed with him.
  - The doctor declared her insane; we, however, disagreed with him.
  - The doctor declared her insane; we disagreed, however, with his opinion.
- ♣ The main function of "however" is to indicate a contrast, so decide which element of your sentence is to be contrasted and place "however" accordingly.
- ♣ Use a semicolon to separate two main clauses joined by a conjunction (*and*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, etc.) if the clauses contain considerable internal punctuation or if they present neatly contrasted ideas:
  - Mr. Jones, our English teacher, rarely looked where he was going; and Bob Smith, the best student in the class, saw him fall into an open manhole on Tuesday.
  - On the one hand, they call for peace; yet, on the other hand, they use violence in trying to achieve it.
- ♣ The other major use of the semicolon is to separate items in a series when the items contain commas:
  - The panel consisted of Dr. Smith, a mathematics professor; Mrs. Jones, an English instructor; and Mr. Clark, visiting lecturer in music.
- ♣ Don't use semicolons too frequently. It's easy to overuse them to cover up inadequacies of logic.
- ♣ In a first draft the semicolon often provides a convenient link between thoughts, but in revising, you may discover that some of these linked statements ought to stand alone.

Try your hand at punctuating these sentences, inserting commas and semicolons where appropriate:

1. The college administrators have authorized the construction of a hospital they plan in the near future to offer a degree in medicine.
2. Bob an excellent creative writer met Mary only last week and perhaps because she is an excellent expository writer they are already engaged to be married.
3. The student committee consisted of Susan Jones a biology major Harold Stanford an engineering student and Harris Ford an undeclared sophomore.
4. The coach was angry according to one of the football players he threatened to make the team run laps.
5. The pipes lay untouched in the clean ashtray Harold had almost forgotten about them since he had quit smoking.
6. The teacher first graded the essays on content then she checked them for grammar and usage.
7. Tim played in most of the game and was involved in much of the action his uniform was therefore very dirty when the game was over.
8. He played in most of the game therefore his uniform was quite dirty when the game was over.
9. Although tired after a long day he jogged for two miles after this he no longer felt tired at all.
10. The horse was sold at auction its owner being unsatisfied with its performance in the race.



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Answers:

1. The college administrators have authorized the construction of a hospital; they plan in the near future to offer a degree in medicine.
2. Bob, an excellent creative writer, met Mary only last week; and, perhaps because she is an excellent expository writer, they are already engaged to be married.
3. The student committee consisted of Susan Jones, a biology major; Harold Stanford, an engineering student; and Harris Ford, an undeclared sophomore.
4. The coach was angry; according to one of the football players, he threatened to make the team run laps. **OR** The coach was angry, according to one of the football players; he threatened to make the team run laps.
5. The pipes lay untouched in the clean ashtray; Harold had almost forgotten about them since he had quit smoking.
6. The teacher first graded the essays on content; then she checked them for grammar and usage.
7. Tim played in most of the game and was involved in much of the action; his uniform was, therefore, very dirty when the game was over.
8. He played in most of the game; therefore his uniform was quite dirty when the game was over.
9. Although tired after a long day, he jogged for two miles; after this, he no longer felt tired at all.
10. The horse was sold at auction, its owner being unsatisfied with its performance in the race.