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# Semicolons

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Use a semicolon to connect two closely related, complete sentences. A semicolon and a period are essentially interchangeable; however, the semicolon suggests the marriage of a perfectly matched couple, almost as if the writer couldn't bear to separate the two thoughts with something as harsh as a period. In the following sentence, notice that the two sentences are so closely related that the writer could have reversed their order:

Hydrogen is the only element without a neutron; each hydrogen atom contains only a proton and an electron.

Good writers often place transition words such as *however* and *therefore* immediately after a semicolon. Remember to place a comma immediately after the transition word. For example, consider the following:

A stable helium nucleus contains two protons and two neutrons; **however**, several unstable helium isotopes contain more than two neutrons.

You may place a transition word in the middle of a sentence. In such instances, put a comma before and after the transition word, as in the following example:

A stable helium nucleus contains two protons and two neutrons; several unstable helium isotopes, **however**, contain more than two neutrons.

You may place multiword transition phrases (such as *on the other hand* or *for example*) immediately following a semicolon, as in the following example:

On one hand, Java enables truly portable programs; **on the other hand**, Java programs often run slowly.

Never place a conjunction (such as *and* or *but*) after a semicolon; for example, the following grammatically improper sentence requires a comma instead of a semicolon:

Assembly language programs run quickly; **but** they are difficult to code.

Occasional use of semicolons helps your writing look more professional. Overuse of semicolons tends to look a little sophomoric.