

### The Semicolon

The semicolon dictates less pause than does a period, but more than does a comma. In many cases, a period or comma could replace a semicolon, and the meaning would remain clear; moreover, the grammar would still be correct. Because the rules concerning their use are flexible, some authors avoid semicolons, perhaps being uncertain of correct usage. Possibly semicolons were used more 100 years ago than they are today; nevertheless, they still have a place in modern technical writing.



Semicolons are indispensable in a long sentence containing a series when commas are found within the elements of the series.

**Example:** WSSA has met recently in Seattle, Washington; St. Louis, Missouri; and Denver, Colorado.

**Example:** The weed population included black medic, a legume; crabgrass, a monocot; and common lambsquarters, a non-leguminous broadleaf weed.

Semicolons can separate independent clauses that are so closely related they are better not written as separate sentences.

**Example:** When I was a boy, weed control involved a great input of hand labor; it's different now.

**Example:** A weed is a plant growing where humans do not want it; thus, volunteer corn is a weed in soybeans.

When two independent clauses are linked by conjunctive adverbs (e.g., however, moreover, therefore, furthermore, consequently), a semicolon is appropriate.

**Example:** The weeds do not show symptoms of herbicide injury; moreover, they seem to be growing normally.

**Example:** The seeding rate was adequate; however, only a few seedlings emerged.

A semicolon is appropriate in complicated sentences before transitional words or phrases (e.g., that is, for example, namely).

**Example:** The examiners all came to the same conclusion; namely, that uncontrolled weeds had reduced the crop yield.

**Example:** Farmers have a great responsibility; that is, feeding a hungry world.

The rules of grammar dictate that elements joined by a semicolon must be of equal rank or weight. Therefore, semicolons must not be used between a dependent clause and its main clause. Such a sentence requires a comma.

**Example:** The crop was heavily infested with weeds, even though it had been cultivated three times.

Remember:

Semicolons, periods, and commas,

Our sentences punctuate.

Each one used correctly

Helps us to communicate.

Jean H. Dawson, Weed Scientist, Prosser, WA 99350