

How Semicolons Work



There has to be a way out of this...

Shedding some light on this most misunderstood of punctuation marks.

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The poor semicolon. This humble punctuation mark can confuse even seasoned writers. Even its name, only half a colon, is sad and misleading.

Don't worry, little guy. You're so much more.

Let's dig into how to properly use the semicolon in your writing. As usual, Ragan's source here is AP style as it's the go-to for most communicators. However, make sure that's what you're using in your organization and that there are no homebrew rules you should be aware of.

What is a semicolon, exactly?

According to “The Associated Press Stylebook” 2020-2022 edition, a semicolon is generally used “to indicate a greater separation of thought and information than a comma can convey but less than the separation that a period implies.”

That clears everything up, right? End of story, move on with your day.

OK, in case you need a little more clarification, let’s go deeper.

In plainer terms, a semicolon indicates a bigger pause than a comma, but a smaller pause than a period. You aren’t bringing the sentence to a full stop, but you aren’t scurrying from one item to the next, either. The semicolon is the middle ground punctuation.

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