

THE SEMICOLON'S UNDESERVED MYSTIQUE

BY ANNE ENQUIST

Anne Enquist is the Writing Advisor at Seattle University School of Law in Seattle, Wash. She is a member of the national Board of Directors for the Legal Writing Institute and has served on the editorial board for the journal Legal Writing: The Journal of the Legal Writing Institute. Professor Enquist is co-author of The Legal Writing Handbook, 3d edition, and three books: Just Writing, Just Briefs, and Just Memos.

Writers' Toolbox ... is a regular feature of Perspectives. In each issue, Anne Enquist will offer suggestions on how to teach specific writing skills, either in writing conferences or in class. Her articles will share tools and techniques used by writing specialists working with diverse audiences, such as J.D. students, ESL students, and practitioners. Readers are invited to contact Professor Enquist at ame@seattleu.edu.

It happened again last week. A student came in for a writing conference and wanted to discuss how she could improve her choppy, rather unsophisticated writing style. As we looked at several of her paragraphs, I pointed out a pair of sentences that might be joined by a semicolon.

"Oh, I never use semicolons," she flatly declared, much in the same way someone might say I don't smoke, eat red meat, or watch reality TV. When I asked why, her answer was equally vague: "I just don't use them."

Having gotten similar responses about semicolons from students over the years, I commented to her that I had noticed other law students avoiding semicolons, and usually it was because they thought they were really difficult to use. I mentioned that semicolons seem to have some kind of undeserved mystique and that they are not only simple to use but also handy to have in one's legal writing repertoire. In fact, if she

wanted, I could explain almost everything she needed to know about semicolons in about three minutes.

The promise that it would be quick and painless won her over, and we set out to conquer the semicolon in three minutes, give or take a few seconds.

I started by assuring her that two main rules about semicolons covered 98 percent of the situations in which they would be used. To understand the first rule, I recommended that she think of a semicolon as a "soft period." Using the two sentences from her writing that had looked like natural candidates for a semicolon, I explained how a semicolon can hold together two main clauses (sometimes called independent clauses), or for the grammatically challenged, two wannabe sentences (has a subject and verb and can stand alone as a sentence).

Example:

The plaintiff is a Nevada resident. The defendant is a California resident.

The plaintiff is a Nevada resident;
main clause (could be a separate sentence)

the defendant is a California resident.
main clause (could be a separate sentence)

Although these two clauses could be separate sentences, they are closely related and, given the diversity jurisdiction context, it was stylistically effective to balance one against the other. When read as a "soft period," the semicolon signaled a pause that is longer than a comma but shorter than a period. Thus, it signaled a relationship between the two clauses that is closer than the relationship between two typical sentences that follow one another.

I then explained a variation on this first rule, which is when the second main clause begins with a transitional word or phrase.

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“Once the items become long or have internal commas, it helps the reader if the items are separated by semicolons.”

Example:

The plaintiff is a Nevada resident. Nevertheless, his car is registered in California.

The plaintiff is a Nevada resident; nevertheless, his car is registered in California.

It helps at this point to draw a chart for students so that they can see that the semicolon is the soft period holding the two clauses (or wannabe sentences) together and that a comma sets off the transition from the rest of the second clause.

_____ ; transition ,
main clause (could be a separate sentence)
 _____ .
main clause (could be a separate sentence)

It also helps to give students a short list of words that commonly fit into the transition slot: *nevertheless, therefore, however, consequently, on the other hand, for example, furthermore, moreover, etc.*

Example:

The summons was not delivered to his usual place of abode; therefore, service was not effected in the manner prescribed by law.

The key to this first rule, then, is to emphasize that most of the time semicolons are like soft periods holding two main clauses together because the clauses are closely related in meaning. It doesn't change anything if the second clause begins with a transition.

The second rule is just as easy as the first. I start by explaining that in a typical series (three or more items grouped together), the items are separated by commas. If there is a simple series in the draft the student is working on, I use that as my example. Otherwise, I pick something simple like the colors of the American flag.

Example:

red, white, and blue
item 1, item 2, and item 3

Building on this example, I show the student how a series can contain increasingly longer and more complex items.

Example:

The defendant ran out of the house,
item 1
through the backyard, and into the alley.
item 2 and item 3

As long as the items are fairly short and do not contain internal punctuation, the commas are enough for the reader to see where one item ends and another begins. Once the items become long or have internal commas, it helps the reader if the items are separated by semicolons, as in the example below.

Example:

The defendant claims to reside in Nevada, even though his car is registered in California; he is registered to vote in California; and all of his financial assets, including stocks, bonds, and a savings and checking account, are in a California bank.

In the example above, the third item in the series (all of his financial assets, including stocks, bonds, and a savings and checking account, are in a California bank) has internal commas, so now the writer is required to use semicolons to separate the items.

_____ ; _____ ;
item 1 item 2
 _____ , _____ , _____ , _____
item 3

Long items in a list, particularly those introduced by numbers, are also separated by semicolons.

