Punctuation

Semicolons

Semicolons are punctuation marks that can be used for two main purposes: 1) to join related ideas and 2) to provide clarity within lists when separating the items with commas could cause confusion.

Semicolons Joining Independent Clauses

Rule: **A semicolon can be used to join two consecutive independent clauses that do not have a coordinating FANBOYS conjunction between them.**

Because semicolons are used between independent clauses, first learn to identify an independent clause by locating its subject and main verb.

If a group of words includes a subject and main verb, expresses a complete idea, and can stand by itself as a grammatical sentence, it's an independent clause. In the example sentence diagram above, the independent clauses "Some…hatred" and "others…understanding" form a compound sentence joined by a semicolon.

If a period could replace the semicolon and create two complete grammatical sentences, the semicolon between two independent clauses is correct.

Example

✗ Mosses thrive in a variety of environments, they can form in frozen tundra or steamy jungles.

✓ Mosses thrive in a variety of environments. They can form in frozen tundra or steamy jungles.

✓ Mosses thrive in a variety of environments; they can form in frozen tundra or steamy jungles.

"Mosses" is the first subject and "thrive" is the first verb. The second subject is "they," followed by the second verb, "can form." Both clauses are independent because "Mosses…environments" and "they…jungles" express complete ideas and can stand alone as grammatical sentences.

In the incorrect example, a comma between the independent clauses creates a comma splice. The second and third examples are both correct because either a period or a semicolon can be used between two independent clauses.

If the ACT offers two answer choices—one with a semicolon and one with a period—that separate independent clauses, look for any other differences in the answer choices that would make one incorrect.

Sometimes independent clauses are hard to recognize when the main verb is placed before the subject.

> Resulting from recent volcanic eruptions are widespread ash clouds.

In the above sentence, the subject is "widespread ash clouds" and the main verb is "are…resulting." One way to determine if the subject has been inverted is to see if you could rewrite the sentence with the subject first. In this case, the sentence would read, "Widespread ash clouds are resulting from recent volcanic eruptions."

Example

✗ Increasing in popularity is urban gardening, this trend focuses on growing food in small spaces.

✓ Increasing in popularity is urban gardening; this trend focuses on growing food in small spaces.

In the examples above, there are two independent clauses. The first contains an inverted subject that could be rewritten as follows: "Urban gardening is increasing in popularity." So "urban gardening" is the subject, and the main verb would be "is." The second independent clause has "this trend" as the subject and "focuses" as the main verb. The correct punctuation between two independent clauses not joined by a conjunction is a semicolon, not a comma.

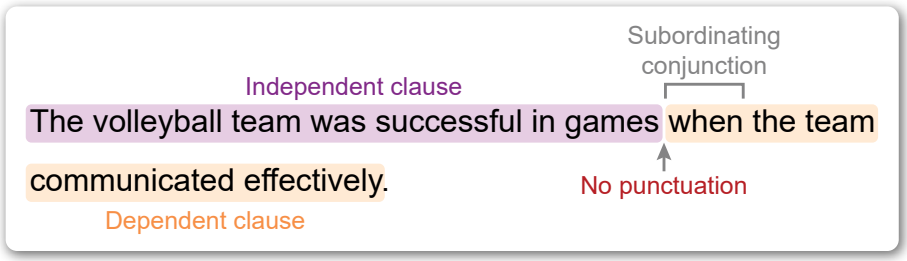
No Semicolons Joining Dependent Clauses to Independent Clauses

***Rule:* When an independent clause is followed by a subordinating conjunction that begins a dependent clause, no punctuation is used before the conjunction.**

Clauses that begin with subordinating conjunctions are dependent clauses because they are incomplete ideas and can't stand on their own as sentences.

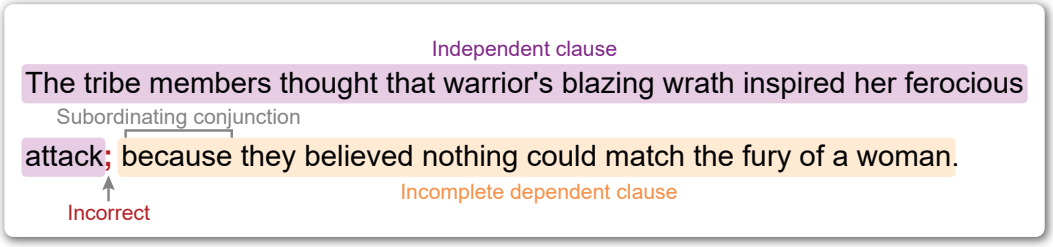
- Although going to the store is productive
- Even if Marissa wanted to attend
- While the patients were waiting to see the doctor

Subordinating Conjunctions				
after	before	now	than	where
although	by the time	now that	that	whereas
as	even	once	then	wherever
as long as	even if	provided that	though	whether
as much as	even though	rather than	unless	which
as soon as	how	since	until	while
because	if	so that	when	why



In the above diagram, notice how no punctuation mark separates the independent clause from the dependent clause.

An incorrect answer choice might place a semicolon between an independent clause and a dependent clause in the same sentence, which is wrong because the dependent clause cannot stand by itself after the semicolon.



In the above example, a semicolon incorrectly separates the independent clause from the dependent clause.

Example

✗ The artist chose to use watercolor paints; when she discovered that they best captured the light in her landscapes.

✓ The artist chose to use watercolor paints when she discovered that they best captured the light in her landscapes.

The subordinating conjunction "when" begins a dependent clause—"when…landscapes"—not a second independent clause. Therefore, placing a semicolon before "when" is incorrect. The correct punctuation is the one with nothing between the independent clause—"The artist… paints"—and the dependent clause.

Sometimes, two independent clauses are separated by a dependent clause in the middle. It can be tricky to determine where to place a semicolon between them because the dependent clause may elaborate on the first independent clause, or it may provide introductory information for the second independent clause. The semicolon should be placed between the two parts that can each stand alone as complete sentences.

Independent clause 1

Scientists have had trouble learning about the deep-sea; since only a few

Introductory dependent clause

divers have gone to extreme ocean depths,

Independent clause 2

there is a lack of data.

In the above example, "Scientists…deep-sea" is an independent clause. What follows it is a dependent clause "since…depths" that begins with a subordinating conjunction. Notice the comma after "depths." That's an indication that this dependent clause is being used as introductory information before a second independent clause—"there…data." Because two independent clauses are being joined in the same sentence without a FANBOYS conjunction between them, the semicolon is correct after "deep sea."

No Semicolons Between or Within Prepositional Phrases

Semicolons are not generally placed between nouns and prepositional phrases that do not begin a second independent clause. One exception might be when prepositional phrases are used in complex lists. (For more information about using semicolons in complex lists, see the "Semicolons and Complex Lists" section below.)

Prepositions List				
about	at	down	near	to
above	before	during	next to	toward
across	behind	except	off	under
after	below	for	on	underneath
against	beneath	from	onto	unlike
ahead of	beside	in	out	until
along	between	inside	outside	up
among	beyond	instead of	over	upon
around	by	into	through	with
aside from	despite	like	throughout	without

Example

✗ Egyptian pharaohs commissioned large building projects; in the hope of glorifying their gods and asserting divine power.

✓ Egyptian pharaohs commissioned large building projects in the hope of glorifying their gods and asserting divine power.

In the incorrect example above, what follows the semicolon is a series of prepositional phrases. These phrases "in the hope…divine power" don't express a complete idea because they lack both a subject and main verb. Therefore, it isn't an independent clause and can't be joined to the preceding independent clause ("Egyptian …projects") with a semicolon.