Some people fear it. Others loathe it. Why is the semicolon so misunderstood? The semicolon is a useful piece of punctuation, allowing the writer to organize a more complex thought into one sentence and the reader to more easily understand that thought. Sometimes called a “supercomma,” the semicolon should be in every writer’s toolbox.

The Basics

The semicolon’s main job is to join two related independent clauses (sentences) together without a conjunction:

Sean loves chocolate cake; it’s the only kind of cake he’ll eat.

Before and after the semicolon are two complete grammatical sentences:

Sean loves chocolate cake.

It’s the only kind of cake he’ll eat.

Either sentence could stand on its own, but I want to show how closely related they are. So I use the semicolon to join the two together.

The semicolon can also be used to separate items in a list when the items contain commas. This helps the reader distinguish between the items:

Between 1815 and 1850 Americans constructed elaborate networks of roads, canals, and early railroad lines; opened up wide areas of newly acquired land for settlement and trade; and began to industrialize manufacturing. (Sean Wilentz, “Society, Politics, and the Market Revolution,” in The New American History 62, as quoted in Garner, 660)

The list in this example is “constructed elaborate networks…,” “opened up wide areas…,” and “began to industrialize manufacturing.” Within the first list item is another list: “roads, canals, and early railroad lines.” The semicolons help the reader keep the information straight.

Let’s Get Fancy

You can join two sentences together with conjunctive adverbs, such as however, indeed, and meanwhile. When you do, use the semicolon to separate the two sentences, not a comma.

Sean will eat only one flavor of cake; however, he will eat several flavors of ice cream.

When a semicolon appears at the end of a phrase in quotation marks, the semicolon goes outside of the quotation marks:

When he eats cake, Duncan likes to sing “I love cake”; Sean doesn’t like to sing while he eats his cake.