



WHEN TO USE SEMI-COLONS

I like to think of punctuation as spice for words—sprinkle in a pinch of commas, add a dash of dashes, and drop in a semicolon or two for flavor. Semicolons, though, can be like the little jars of marjoram or fennel in the back of the spice rack. I’m still not really sure what marjoram does, but sometimes I throw some in and hope it works out.

That’s how I used to think about semicolons; as with spices, though, knowing what they do makes all the difference. On the face of it, a semicolon seems like just another way to separate ideas; I think that’s because semicolons can be used mundanely to separate a list when the items contain commas. Yet, the main role of a semicolon isn’t to separate things at all; its primary job is actually to tie things together.

I used semicolons several times in the previous paragraph. In each case, I used a semicolon where I could otherwise use a period: between two independent clauses that could stand alone. Unlike the comma or the period, though, the semicolon is actually a unit of meaning; semicolons tell us that there is a nuanced relationship between the ideas in two sentences. The semicolon is the shortest, most efficient way to say “Look! These things are linked!”

At this point in my life as writer, I love semicolons. Like spices, they have a powerful impact on the end result. When I make chili, I mix in some cinnamon and cloves to help blend the flavors. Likewise, with intention, I mix some semicolons into my writing; I look for the right places and use them to help integrate my ideas with a deeper, more subtle flavor. And, hopefully, to leave my reader engaged and hungry for more.

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