Commas versus Semicolons

Commas and semicolons connect thoughts in a sentence. Although the two function in the same way, semicolons separate independent elements in a list that have commas, combine independent sentences, and clarify long sentences. Commas, on the other hand, perform many more functions.

Commas
Commas separate elements in a list, connect closely related dependent clauses, isolate non-essential information within a sentence, signify an introduction, and separate text from a quote or from dialogue.

Separating elements in a list
Incorrect: The scuba diver used an air tank a pair of fins a mask and a snorkel.
Correct: The scuba diver used an air tank, a pair of fins, a mask, and a snorkel.

In order for the sentence to be correct and clear, each element must be separated with a comma.

Connecting closely related clauses
Incorrect: The scuba diver had a snorkel. But it had a hole in it.
Correct: The scuba diver had a snorkel, but it had a hole in it.

All that needs to be done to make the first sentence correct is to replace the first period with a comma and to make the B in “but” lowercase. Because these two thoughts are closely related, a comma and a coordinating conjunction must be used to separate them.

Isolating non-essential information
Incorrect: The scuba diver a famous athlete set the record for the deepest dive.
Correct: The scuba diver, a famous athlete, set the record for the deepest dive.

In order to make this sentence clear, the non-essential information must be enveloped within commas. The first sentence leads the reader to think that the scuba diver and the famous athlete are two different people; however, the second sentence clarifies for the reader that the scuba diver and the famous athlete were the same person.

Signifying an introduction
Incorrect: Before the diver dove he did breathing exercises and checked his scuba gear.
Correct: Before the diver dove, he did breathing exercises and checked his scuba gear.
The second sentence is clearer than the first, because the comma allows the reader to distinguish the dependent clause from the independent clause.

**Separating text from dialogue or a quote**

*Incorrect:* The scuba diver’s friends told him “You’ve trained for months. You can beat the world record today.”

*Correct:* The scuba diver’s friends told him, “You’ve trained for months. You can beat the world record today.”

The first sentence is incorrect, because a comma is necessary to introduce dialogue or a quote.

**Semicolons**

Like commas, semicolons separate elements in a list, but only if the individual elements have commas within them. Likewise, they are used when combining closely related sentences and when using conjunctive adverbs, such as however, moreover, therefore, et cetera. It is very easy to overuse the semicolon, so be sure your sentence fits the requirements listed above.

**Separating elements in a list**

*Incorrect:* The scuba diver’s friends, his wife, Mary, and a reporter were there to cheer him on.

*Correct:* The scuba diver’s friends; his wife, Mary; and a reporter were there to cheer him on.

The first sentence is incorrect and unclear because the reader does not know that Mary is the scuba diver’s wife. We are led to think that Mary has come along in addition to his wife; whereas the second sentence separates the elements for us so that we know that the diver’s wife and Mary is the same person.

**Combining closely related sentences**

*Incorrect:* The scuba diver invited people to see him break the record. It was important to him.

*Correct:* The scuba diver invited people to see him break the record; it was important to him.

*Correct:* Because it was important to him, the scuba diver invited people to see him break the record
The second sentence and the third sentence are both correct because they both combine the two independent clauses. The second sentence uses a semicolon to consolidate the two sentences into one, and the third sentence uses a comma followed by because to create one sentence. The second independent clause becomes dependent by adding the word “because.”

Using conjunctive adverbs

Incorrect: The scuba diver was anxious, however, he knew he could dive deeper than anyone else.
Correct: The scuba diver was anxious; however, he knew he could dive deeper than anyone else.
Correct: The scuba diver was anxious; he knew, however, that he could dive deeper than anyone else.

 Conjunctive adverbs typically require semicolons before them and a comma after them, because those words signify an abrupt shift in direction. The first clause tells us that the diver was nervous, but the second clause tells us that his nervousness did not affect his decision to dive. Additionally, both clauses before and after the semicolon are independent, and therefore need a semicolon. The third sentence is an example an exception to the rule. The semicolon still connects the two independent clauses, but because “however” is placed in the middle of the second independent clause, it only needs commas to separate it from the rest of the sentence.

Contact

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