



# tipsheet

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## Beyond the Comma: Using Semi-colons and Dashes

Writers are often most concerned with *ideas*. Ideas, however, must be presented well to be effective. By correctly using alternative forms of punctuation—such as the semi-colon and dash—you can vary your sentence structure and rhythm, convey your ideas in a clear fashion, and master a more sophisticated writing style.

### USING THE SEMI-COLON

- 1. Joining clauses:** Use the semi-colon to join two closely related independent clauses.
  - o Example: “Stock prices have climbed since the merger; we also noted an increase in overall sales.”
  - o Note: To test your use of the semi-colon, replace it with a period. Do you have two complete sentences that are related to the same issue? If you do, you’ve used the semi-colon correctly. If you have a sentence fragment on either side of the semi-colon, try using a comma instead.
- 2. Joining clauses with transitional words or phrases:** Use the semi-colon to join two closely related independent clauses connected by transitional words (i.e. however, therefore, indeed, otherwise, consequently, finally, then, furthermore, thus, nevertheless, similarly, and nonetheless) or phrases (i.e. in addition, more importantly, for example, on the other hand, to summarize, of course, and in fact).
  - o Example: “We must maintain our current plan of action for the next six months; however, after six months, we can consider other options.”
  - o Example: We have noticed considerable company growth in the past three months; of course, we must consider the effects of next month’s merger before we determine our employment goals for next year.”
- 3. Linking lists when items of the list contain commas:** When you have items in a list or series that contain commas, separate the items with a semi-colon to maintain clarity.
  - o Example: “We can choose one of two routes for this project: we can hire an outside firm, which will be costly and quick; or, we can have someone complete the project in-house, which will be less expensive but take considerably longer.
  - o Example: “We visited Denver, Colorado; Concord, New Hampshire; and Chapel Hill, North Carolina.”

### USING THE DASH

- 1. The “m-dash”:** The “m-dash,” or em dash, creates breaks in sentences. The break may emphasize a change in thought, or it may help to create emphasis on a specific word or phrase.
  - o Example: You can use a pair of em dashes like a set of parentheses—to set off an idea or a clause within a sentence—just like I’m doing here. The em dash—which never has spaces on either side of it—can be a useful form of punctuation.
  - o Example: The single em dash should be used at the end of a sentence to emphasize a word or phrase—just like I’m doing here.
  - o Example: He came to the meeting—albeit 30 minutes late—with a great proposal.
  - o Example: Our company needs to focus on just one thing—progress.
  - o Note: locate the em dash using the “Insert Symbol” function in Microsoft Word (under the “General Punctuation” menu).

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