When to use the Semicolon

1. Use a **semicolon** to separate main or independent clauses when a coordinating conjunction is not used, as in the following example:

   The responsibility for health care does not just lie with health care professionals; it is the responsibility of every individual.

   Look at the above sentence. The clause in front of the semi colon is an independent clause, and the clause after the semi colon is an independent clause. When you have this situation, **use a semi colon!**

   **DO NOT:**

   Use a comma alone to connect independent clauses. If you do, you will create an error called a comma splice.

2. Use a **semicolon** when you are connecting independent clauses using a type of conjunction known as a **conjunctive adverb.**

   **Conjunctive adverbs** are often used to connect independent clauses with other independent clauses as well as with dependent clauses. Here is a list of commonly used conjunctive adverbs:

   consequently
   finally
   for instance
   hence
   however
   in addition
   moreover
nevertheless
still
therefore
then
thus

When a conjunctive adverb is used to connect independent clauses, put a semicolon before the adverb and a comma after it, as shown in the following example:

The responsibility for health care does lie with health care professionals; however, it is also the responsibility of every individual.

WARNING:

A conjunctive adverb may appear within an independent clause. When this happens, use commas to set off the conjunctive adverb. Consider this example:

The responsibility for health care does lie with health care professionals; it is also, however, the responsibility of every individual. The word however comes in the middle of the independent clause it is also the responsibility of every individual. Therefore, it is set off by commas.

Some words and phrases function like conjunctive adverbs. The words or phrases in the following list are punctuated in the same way as conjunctive adverbs:

in fact
indeed
for example
for instance
at any rate
on the one hand
on the other hand
The following sentence correctly uses a semicolon with a phrase that functions as a conjunctive adverb:

\[
\text{The responsibility for health care does not just lie with health care professionals; for example, it is the responsibility of every individual.}
\]

When these words or phrases do not separate independent clauses, use commas to set them off from the rest of the sentence:

\[
\text{The responsibility for health care, for example, does not just lie with health care professionals.}
\]

**FYI:**

You will often notice that British writers, especially older ones (Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Jonathan Swift) use the semi colon much more than American writing does.

It’s a British thing.