

INPUT GUIDE

Semicolons:

The Forgotten Punctuation Mark

by Jean Sexton

In the last issue of *Captain's Log* you learned all about commas and how to use them so that the Purple Pen of Perdition will not come swooping down on your prose. In proofreading this issue of *Captain's Log*, I noticed that semicolons were a difficulty for some of our writers. Used correctly, semicolons will impress not only ADB, Inc., but also your employer or anyone that you may have reason to write reports for or correspondence to.

Sometimes semicolons are called "the weak period". That is because they can join two sentences that are very closely related. If you have two big thoughts in one sentence, see if you could put a period between them. If you could, replace that comma with a semicolon. Here's an example:

Mike West is the Answer Guy for *Federation Commander*; Mike Curtis is the *F.E.A.R.* for *F&E*.

You can use the semicolon to appear more sophisticated by replacing the "and" that you may have used to join two sentences. Compare these:

Steven Petrick is in charge of the *SFB* Gold Hat Tournament and Mike Filsinger runs the *Federation Commander* Tournament at Origins.

Chuck Strong is in charge of the *F&E* room at Origins; Steve Cole is in charge of the sales booth.

The latter sentence appears to a casual reader to be written by a sophisticated author with a more mature writing style. In the first sentence's style you could almost hear a child saying "I bought a pink pony and Sally bought a purple pony and Molly bought a green pony and Tina bought ..." (Well, I could, anyway.)

Remember that a semicolon joins two sentences that are "equal" in strength and not something that couldn't stand on its own. The next sentence is wrong:

Jean ate her lunch; while Steven ran the booth.

The sentence is incorrect because "While Steven ran the booth" isn't a complete sentence and "Jean ate her lunch" is. In that case, you do not need *any* punctuation after "lunch".

Semicolons are also used when creating lists that have internal commas. Punctuation is all about helping the reader understand what the writer is communicating. Check out the following sentence.

Jean sold that guy *Captain's Log* #39, #40, and #41; *SFB Modules G3A, Y2, and R12*; two Juggernaut minis; and over a dozen *F&E* countersheets!

See how the semicolons group similar things together? There is an additional caveat when you do this: once you have started using semicolons in a list, you have to continue doing it even if some of the groups do not include commas. That is why a semicolon is used after "Juggernaut minis".

When semicolons join two similar sentences, you can use a comma in the second sentence to "replace" the duplicate part from the first sentence. Consider the following sentences:

Tony bought Countersheet Alpha. Mike bought Countersheet Bravo. Chuck bought the bases countersheet.

The writing is repetitive, but semicolons can fix that:

Tony bought Countersheet Alpha; Mike, Countersheet Bravo; Chuck, the bases countersheet.

See how the comma was twice substituted for "bought" and

the sentences were joined by semicolons? That is a sign of a sophisticated author writing for a well-educated audience. (If I were writing for a children's book, I would have used the first set of sentences, followed by: See Tony buy the minis. See Mike buy the books. See Chuck buy more countersheets. Buy, Tony, buy!)

Dashes:

The Overused Punctuation Mark

by Jean Sexton

I have observed this in reviewing submitted (and supposedly edited) articles: most of our writers don't use dashes; those who do, use way too many of them. In almost every case where you use a dash you can use some other punctuation mark. If you have more than two dashes on a page, *replace some of them*. Don't "consider" replacing some of them or "think about" replacing some of them, just *replace most of them* because if you do not, Steve Cole (and I) most certainly will. It is to your advantage on many levels to reduce the amount of "fixing" we have to do to your work: it means that the published article is closer to what you wrote, we'll be more interested in getting more articles from you, and it cuts down on the time and frustration involved in getting a product finished.

Try these sentences:

Terry O'Carroll's nickname – Full Stop – reflects his British roots. Leanna Cole drove her car into work – she picked up a diet Dr. Pepper for her husband. Will McCammon bought five starship minis – the Juggernaut, the B9, the B10, and two ISC frigates. Tos Crawford's greatest contribution to *SFB* — the infamous "Crawford box" — constantly drives Steven Petrick crazy.

The first set of paired dashes could have been replaced with commas; the dash in the second sentence could have been replaced with a semicolon; the third sentence could have used a colon instead of the dash; the fourth sentence could have used parentheses. Try these sentences:

Terry O'Carroll's nickname, Full Stop, reflects his British roots. Leanna Cole drove her car into work; she picked up a diet Dr. Pepper for her husband. Will McCammon bought five starship minis: the Juggernaut, the B9, the B10, and two ISC frigates. Tos Crawford's greatest contribution to *SFB* (the infamous "Crawford box") constantly drives Steven Petrick crazy.

You could have used commas in the fourth sentence and parentheses in the first. (Just for your information, the term "full stop" is what British people say when they mean that little dot at the end of a sentence that Americans call a "period". An American might say "That's my final answer! Period!" while an Englishman might say "That's my final answer! Full stop!")

There are two correct uses for a dash. The first is to create a dramatic pause in the text. Try this sentence:

You'll never guess the winner of the Gold Hat — *Jean Sexton!*

It just wouldn't be as effective with a comma, would it?

Given that dashes are supposed to be used for a dramatic pause, overusing them (were other punctuation marks would be better) reduces the dramatic impact of the properly used dash.

Dashes are visually jarring, and when you're showing a dramatic pause, that's what you want.

The second use is when a descriptive phrase has commas inside it, and using commas to set it off would confuse things.

Steven's plans for Tos — tar, feather, exile — have been nixed.

While parentheses would have worked, the sentence called for a certain flair.

A FINAL WORD

One writer recently said it was too hard to "check several issues" of *Captain's Log* to learn the style guides. They're on the website, so print them out and staple them together and keep them beside your computer. Now, go forth and write!