



TRANSCRIPT: SEASON 3, EPISODE 5
UNDERSTANDING SEMI-COLONS

Denise Cowle: Hello and welcome to this episode of The Editing Podcast. So we're chatting about semi-colons this week. And I have to say, this is probably the most misunderstood piece of punctuation in a writer's toolbox.

Louise Harnby: Yes, and one of the most disliked, I think. And that arises in part because of the confusion about how to use it. But – and I think this might be more so in the case of fiction – there's also something about its appearance. Some people have a real aversion to it ... think it looks clunky and unattractive.

DC: So let's start with what it looks like. The semi-colon is that little mark that looks like a comma with a full stop on top (;). So we'll have a chat about what it does and then talk a little more about some of the objections.

LH: So the first standard use of a semi-colon is to separate two independent clauses in a sentence that are closely linked. Now, the thing to notice here is that it's usually the case that those two parts of the sentence can stand on their own. That means there's a subject and a predicate.

DC: A subject is the person or thing that's doing or being something. So, for example, in the sentence 'The fireworks light up the night sky', the subject is 'the fireworks' because it's those that are doing something.

LH: And a predicate is a part of a sentence that includes a verb and tells us something about what the subject's doing or experiencing. So in that same sentence, 'The fireworks light up the night sky', the predicate is 'light up the night sky', because that's tells us what the subject's doing.

DC: So let's get two related independent clauses and think about how to punctuate them. How about: 'I love tomatoes' and 'Red and yellow ones are my favourites'. The semi-colon goes after the word 'tomatoes'.

- I love tomatoes; red and yellow ones are my favourites.

Now you could use a full point, but if you want the punctuation to show a relationship between those two clauses, then the semi-colon will do that for you.

LH: Now if you do use a semi-colon, the second independent clause doesn't take an initial capital letter. So 'red' would all be in lower case. But if you used a full stop to separate those clauses, 'red' would take a capital 'R'.

- I love tomatoes; red and yellow ones are my favourites.
- I love tomatoes. Red and yellow ones are my favourites.

DC: Now the difference between using a semi-colon and a full stop will be subtle to the reader in some cases. But that's what good writing's about in part ... using punctuation effectively to show readers mood, connections, and power relationships.

LH: Exactly. And that feeds back to our earlier example. It's about weighting, or more specifically in this case about parallelism, because neither clause is a consequence of or subordinate to the other. That Denise likes tomatoes is equally weighted with her statement about which ones are her favourites. And I'd say that in fiction – and you'd probably agree with this for creative non-fiction too, Denise – that a semi-colon can really help to quickly bring intimacy to related statements because it's a much softer piece of punctuation than a full point, less jarring. Though not as soft as a comma, which we need to address.

DC: Indeed we do. So could you use a comma to separate those two sentences? That's something we both see a lot in both fiction and non-fiction. And the answer is, it's non-standard. I'm going to avoid saying it's wrong or incorrect, because that sounds prescriptive, but a lot of people would consider it incorrect, without question. Now, we'll dedicate an episode to this, but when two independent clauses are separated by a comma, that's called a comma splice.

LH: And comma splices are generally frowned upon in formal or conventionally styled writing – not always out of snobbery and prescriptiveness, but because they trip readers up. And that's a good reason to avoid them because people who don't know what a comma splice is won't be bothered, but those who do know are the ones more likely to get grumpy about them. Anyway, let's get back to semi-colons.

So the next use for the semicolon is to separate the items in a list.

DC: And that's really helpful when you have a more complex list in which the items aren't single words but phrases and clauses that already have commas in them. So imagine you had a list that included the following:

- Red Ferraris, all left-hand drive
- blue trucks, most of which were flatbeds
- and green tractors, some with flat tyres

If you want to separate those with a comma, the whole sentence is going to be really comma-heavy and quite difficult to plough through.

- Red Ferraris, all left-hand drive, blue trucks, most of which were flatbeds, and green tractors, some with flat tyres.

So if instead you separate them with semi-colons, it's much easier to read.

- Red Ferraris, all left-hand drive; blue trucks, most of which were flatbeds; and green tractors, some with flat tyres.

LH: And that's important not just in terms of clarity but also in terms of pacing. So commas are, as we said above, quite soft pieces of punctuation that often accelerate the pace of a sentence because we speed over them. Full stops do exactly what they say on the tin. They bring us to a stop; they moderate the pace. Semi-colons are a halfway house. They slow us down a little, force us to take stock of the clauses they separate, but they don't jar us to a halt. And especially in creative writing, you might want to think about that pacing, that rhythm, and how your little punctuation marks can help you to evoke mood through rhythm and pace.

DC: Now when I wrote about semi-colons back in 2016, there's something I didn't mention, but we really should here. Emojis. These might crop up in fiction – I'm thinking emails or texts – but I'm seeing them in academic writing too, particularly in media and communication studies research.

LH: Yep, so you might need a semi-colon and a closing round bracket for a winking face 😏. I'm not sure if there are other emojis that use semi-colons, but anyway ... shall we talk about some of the objections?

DC: Good idea. So one of the objections is that they're pretentious. I don't quite get this. I don't think there's anything pretentious about writing that has clarity. What I do think is that too many of them in too close proximity can jar in a way that's not the case with the comma.

LH: I agree. It's the same with colons. I suspect it's because both those pieces of punctuation have a top and a bottom – they're more in your face, more invasive to the eye. And on the pretentious thing, I've seen plenty of great

writers, some writing gritty crime fiction, use semi-colons to indicate parallelism really effectively.

DC: Now in some of the editing forums, I've seen some objection to these being used in dialogue. Do you want to talk about that, Louise?

LH: Yeah, so the reason given by most objectors is that the reader can't 'hear' **the punctuation**. I don't quite get this. Dialogue in a novel is just that – it's a written version of the spoken word. You can't hear an apostrophe or an initial capital letter either but that doesn't mean an author would exclude them from dialogue. I think that if a semi-colon helps to bring clarity and indicate a relationship in dialogue, it can be used there. What I will say is that there is absolutely no grammatical justification for excluding semi-colons in dialogue. None at all.

DC: So like most things, it's a style choice. If you want to use a semi-colon, and know how to use it, go ahead and use it. There's no rule. The most important thing is to understand the power of it. After that, it's up to you.

LH: Yes. Some of my authors tell me they don't want me editing them in on any account. So if I think the prose will benefit from an indication of parallelism, I might try a spaced en dash or closed-up em dash, depending on what style the book's written in.

DC: Same here. So that's it for semi-colons. Now it's time for Editing Bites – the regular bit of the show where we each recommend a favourite resource that we think you'll find useful. So mine is *Semicolon: How a misunderstood punctuation mark can improve your writing, enrich your reading and even change your life* by Cecilia Watson.

LH: And mine is the National Centre for Writing's podcast, which you'll find if you search for NCW Podcast. There are some amazing learning resources on there. Just a taster: Tackling representation in fiction, writing crime fiction protagonists, finding time to write if you're a new parent, finding writing inspiration from tragedy, and Margaret Atwood's top-five writing tips. So that's well worth digging into.

DC: Excellent. So we hope you've enjoyed this episode. Thank you so much for listening to The Editing Podcast. You can rate, review and subscribe to us via Apple Podcasts, Spotify or whichever platform you prefer.

LH: And we've put all the links we've mentioned in the show notes so you can grab everything there.

Editing bites

- National Centre for Writing's podcast
- *Semicolon: How a misunderstood punctuation mark can improve your writing, enrich your reading and even change your life* by Cecilia Watson

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