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I started by assuring her that two main rules about semicolons covered 98 percent of the situations in which they would be used. To understand the first rule, I recommended that she think of a semicolon as a “soft period.” Using the two sentences from her writing that had looked like natural candidates for a semicolon, I explained how a semicolon can hold together two main clauses (sometimes called independent clauses), or for the grammatically challenged, two wannabe sentences (has a subject and verb and can stand alone as a sentence).

Example:
The plaintiff is a Nevada resident. The
defendant is a California resident.

The plaintiff is a Nevada resident;
main clause (could be a separate sentence)
the defendant is a California resident,
main clause (could be a separate sentence)

Although these two clauses could be separate sentences, they are closely related and, given the diversity jurisdiction context, it was stylistically effective to balance one against the other. When read as a “soft period,” the semicolon signaled a pause that is longer than a comma but shorter than a period. Thus, it signaled a relationship between the two clauses that is closer than the relationship between two typical sentences that follow one another.

I then explained a variation on this first rule, which is when the second main clause begins with a transitional word or phrase.
Example:
The plaintiff is a Nevada resident. Nevertheless, his car is registered in California.

The plaintiff is a Nevada resident; nevertheless, his car is registered in California.

It helps at this point to draw a chart for students so that they can see that the semicolon is the soft period holding the two clauses (or wannabe sentences) together and that a comma sets off the transition from the rest of the second clause.

_________________________; transition
main clause (could be a separate sentence)
_________________________.
main clause (could be a separate sentence)

It also helps to give students a short list of words that commonly fit into the transition slot: nevertheless, therefore, however, consequently, on the other hand, for example, furthermore, moreover, etc.

Example:
The summons was not delivered to his usual place of abode; therefore, service was not effected in the manner prescribed by law.

The key to this first rule, then, is to emphasize that most of the time semicolons are like soft periods holding two main clauses together because the clauses are closely related in meaning. It doesn't change anything if the second clause begins with a transition.

The second rule is just as easy as the first. I start by explaining that in a typical series (three or more items grouped together), the items are separated by commas. If there is a simple series in the draft the student is working on, I use that as my example. Otherwise, I pick something simple like the colors of the American flag.

Example:
red, white, and blue
item 1, item 2, and item 3

Building on this example, I show the student how a series can contain increasingly longer and more complex items.

Example:
The defendant ran out of the house,
item 1
through the backyard, and into the alley.
item 2 and item 3

As long as the items are fairly short and do not contain internal punctuation, the commas are enough for the reader to see where one item ends and another begins. Once the items become long or have internal commas, it helps the reader if the items are separated by semicolons, as in the example below.

Example:
The defendant claims to reside in Nevada, even though his car is registered in California; he is registered to vote in California; and all of his financial assets, including stocks, bonds, and a savings and checking account, are in a California bank.

In the example above, the third item in the series (all of his financial assets, including stocks, bonds, and a savings and checking account, are in a California bank) has internal commas, so now the writer is required to use semicolons to separate the items.

_________________________; _________________;
item 1 item 2
_________________________, _________________
item 3

Long items in a list, particularly those introduced by numbers, are also separated by semicolons.
Example:
The defendant claims to reside in Nevada, even though several facts indicate he is a resident of California: (1) his car is registered in California; (2) he is registered to vote in California; and (3) all of his financial assets, including stocks, bonds, and a savings and checking account, are in a California bank.

A typical student response to the three-minute semicolon lesson is usually “That’s it?” This student was no different. To her “that’s it” question, I replied that there are one or two other semicolon rules that she might want to check out in our textbook but that they come up infrequently in legal writing. I also reminded her to use semicolons to separate citations in a string cite, but basically, I said, “That’s it.” The veil is lifted; no big cosmic mystery here. The semicolon mystique is broken.

Now that the student has learned just how simple semicolons are to use, my past experience with other students suggests that she will treat them like a new toy to play with in her writing. And if my past experience holds up, my only new problem will be convincing her not to overuse them the next couple of times she writes. With time, my hope will be that she’ll find a balance between “I never use them” and “I always use them” to just using them when they are the right tool for the job.

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Editor’s note:

In the Fall 2003 Writers’ Toolbox column, “Should I Teach My Students Not to Write in Passive Voice?”, text on page 35 should have read as follows:

Example: Joe wrote the brief.
The student readily sees that the sentence is in past tense (“wrote” as opposed to the present tense “writes”), and then I explain that although the verb is in the past tense, this is an active voice sentence because of the relationship between the subject (“Joe”) and the verb (“wrote”). The subject is actively doing the verb; hence the term, “active voice.” This relationship is easily symbolized by drawing an arrow between “Joe” and “wrote.”

Active voice: Joe ➔ wrote the brief.

subject verb

Then I add the passive voice version of the same sentence, noting that now the subject of the sentence is “brief” and the verb is “was written”:

Passive voice: The brief ← was written by Joe.

subject verb

West apologizes to Professor Enquist for the production error that caused the arrow in her first example to be reversed.

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