



Common Core Language Standards: Grammar and Mechanics

Focus: Semicolons

Overview

This lesson focuses on introducing students to a fundamental use of semicolons and colons, specifically joining clauses and creating compound and compound-complex sentences in student writing.

Standards

9-10.L.2. Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

- a. Use a semicolon (and perhaps a conjunctive adverb) to link two or more closely related independent clauses.
- b. Use a colon to introduce a list or quotation.
- c. Spell correctly.

9-10.L.3. Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

- a. Write and edit work so that it conforms to the guidelines in a style manual (e.g., *MLA Handbook*, *Turabian's Manual for Writers*) appropriate for the discipline and writing type.

Objectives

- To understand correct usage of punctuation, specifically semicolons and colons
- To edit text for conventional punctuation
- To recognize clarity in writing because of correct punctuation usage

Materials

- A good grammar textbook rich in examples such as *Warriner's English Handbook, Sixth Course*
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Activity 1

Lecture

Introduce the definition of a semicolon to students. This is infinitely easier if you have a good, thorough, grammar book.¹

The following definition is a deliberate oversimplification, but it's an important point to make:

- A semicolon functions like a period that continues a sentence.
- If you can put a period somewhere, you are allowed to put a semicolon in the same place.

Again, apologies to grammaticasters for the oversimplification! Students often do not see or understand this basic function of the semicolon, and without understanding this one, the more subtle and involved uses to which this very functional piece of punctuation can be put will effectively be lost and semicolons will be randomly scattered about like popcorn at the movies.

Explain that semicolons are wonderful for joining together two closely-related complete sentences, especially if you want them to have a “punchy” sound, as in this famous example:

I came; I saw; I conquered.²

Notice how this “punchiness” would be lost if the sentence were written with an abundance of conjunctions – a technique that can please only the promoters of the polysyndeton?

I came, and I saw, and I conquered.

There's an efficient, professional “get down to business” quality in the first that's absent from the second. The second sounds more like a labored list of Things to Do; the first sounds like the triumphant conquest of Gaul.³

¹ I highly recommend the venerable *Warriner's English Grammar, Sixth Course*. It is currently published as part of the Holt “Traditions” textbook line through Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

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² Yes, technically you can separate these with commas because the clauses are so short.

³Which it was! See “Famous Quotes of Julius Caesar.”



Group Work

Have students write out 2-3 sets of sentences that are closely related.

Example

Original sentence: My brother Billy has a pterodactyl. He rides it to school daily. This fills me with the greatest of envy.

Revised sentence: My brother Billy has a pterodactyl; he rides it to school daily; this fills me with the greatest of envy.

At this point, it would be helpful to teach students about sentence patterns, particularly the following ones:

- SV; SV; SV. (Subject verb; subject verb -- e.g., *I came; I saw; I conquered.*)
- SV; conjunctive adverb, SV. (e.g., Billy rode a pterodactyl; however, I could not do so.)
- Subordinate clause, SV; SV.

Students can practice writing sentences in the above patterns until they start getting the “feel” for where and when semicolons can be used.

NOTE: If further exercises and practice are needed, using the example sentences and exercises from a textbook such as *Warriner’s* can be extremely helpful for reinforcing the concepts.

Activity 2: Listening for Punctuation

Lecture

Obviously, students sometimes have an issue understanding when and where semicolons go and perceiving when a sentence is not a sentence, but a run-on or a fragment. Part of the issue is that some students don’t necessarily “hear” where punctuation should go. To sharpen their understanding, try a somewhat old-school approach: dictation.



Practice

Read the following sentences (or similar ones) aloud. Students will listen to the sentences two times and write them down. Accuracy counts! Teachers may wish to evaluate students' sentences based on punctuation alone or may wish to include other criteria such as spelling or capitalization, depending on the degree of students' needs.

Example Dictation Sentences

1. My favorite meal is a mixture of Spam and ketchup; it is both tasty and cheap.
2. Although Billy rides a dinosaur to school, I myself prefer to take the bus; it is somewhat more conventional.
3. My uncle Chet bought Billy the dinosaur; however, he did not buy me one.

Obviously, this exercise can be extended to focus on whatever element of grammar or language skills being worked on. Additional exercises in *Warriner's* in which students correct sentences for misused semicolons (or run-ons) would be even more helpful to reinforce the concepts here.

Activity 3: Working with Colons

Lecture

As with the semicolon lecture, it's often helpful for students to understand what a colon is and when one might wish to use one.

Here again, *Warriner's English Handbook, Sixth Course* might be extremely useful to provide succinct and accurate definitions of colon use, but all the same, here are two relatively important uses this specific lesson will address:

Colons can be used to introduce lists.
Colons can be used to introduce explanations.

Lists

This is the colon use with which most people are familiar – the colon as a signal saying, "Hey, I'm about to give you a list!" See the example below:



Billy promised me three gifts for Christmas: a new Wii to replace the one he sat on, a free trip to Disneyland, and a sparkly magic unicorn.

Most students probably know this particular colon use, so you might want to touch on it only briefly. However, one element of colon use that is less familiar is the following rule of usage: Colons should NOT be used after a verb.

Examples of Wrong Colon Use

- The three reasons why colon use after a verb is wrong ~~are~~: it angers your English teacher, it wastes a valuable colon, and it makes turtles cry.
- When Billy got his magical sparkly unicorn for Christmas, I ~~felt~~: angry, envious, and intrigued

Introducing Explanations

One of the more fun uses of colons is in the following sentence pattern:

Compound Sentence with Explanatory Statement

SV: SV.

Example

My uncle Archibald had an unusual hobby: he painted pictures of pet pangolins.

Here, the second independent clause, introduced with a colon, is used to explain or provide more information about the information in the first clause. Its effect is almost like saying, “Ta-daaaa!” before pulling the metaphorical “curtain” open to reveal the information in the last clause. It’s really rather cool.

Group Work Activity

Students can construct at least 4-5 sentences using the colon as a way to introduce an explanation. Students should be encouraged to write funny (although appropriate) sentences in order to illustrate the concept, mostly because writing humorous grammar sentences is infinitely more amusing than writing dull ones. Extra credit might be given for particularly inventive (and accurately-written) sentences.



Activity 4: Wrapping it Up

Group Work – Making Quizzes

In order to reinforce these concepts, students can get together in groups and write three to four questions for a student-authored quiz using the following format. On the right, students can put their quiz questions illustrating incorrect (or correct!) colon and semicolon use. On the right, they can put the expected correction. Teachers can then collect the quiz questions, collate the 10-15 best examples, and use them as an actual quiz following the lesson. Encourage students to present questions illustrating at least three different rules of colon use.

Quiz Question	Expected Correction
<p>Correct the following sentence for colon use. If the sentence is already correct, write "C."</p> <p>Billy promised me I could: see the sparkly unicorn, feed the sparkly unicorn, and sit there wishing I could ride the sparkly unicorn.</p>	<p>Billy promised me I could <u>do the following</u>: see the sparkly unicorn, feed the sparkly unicorn, and sit there wishing I could ride the sparkly unicorn.</p>

Conclusion

Reinforce student mastery of semicolons and colons in other ways throughout the year. One possibility might be to require students to use specific sentence patterns or sentence structures (e.g., periodic sentences, loose sentences, compound-complex sentences) in their writing assignments. Only through repeated practice can students "make it their own"!

Resources

- Strunk, William, Jr., and E. B. White. *The Elements of Style*. Fourth Edition. New York: Longman, 2000.
(If you don't remember this one or don't have a copy, it's time to get one!)



- OWL English Site at Purdue
<http://www.grammarbook.com/punctuation/semicolons.asp>
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/607/04/>
Good, easy examples and rules for commas and semicolons — and much more!
- WISC Grammar Handbook
<http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/Semicolons.html>
Good rules, easy to navigate; these examples may be a bit complex, but can be adapted easily to fit the language level of your class.
- Hub Pages
<http://hubpages.com/hub/Semicolonvscomma>
This site includes errors in usage (and their corrections, of course).
- My English Teacher
<http://www.myenglishteacher.net/USINGCOLONS.HTML>
This site is very easy to navigate and has level-appropriate examples.
- Grammar CC
<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/marks/colon.htm>
Easy examples and a very funny video clip! PowerPoint available from this link.
- EHow.Com
http://www.ehow.com/how_5954_colon.html
Very straight forward list of rules—maybe more rules than you need.