

Semicolonoscopy

A two-step probe into the much misunderstood · /

“Having one pet cat is good. Two cats would be even better.”

As you can see, we have two sentences here. Both are just fine with or without each other.

However, although the two sentences are independent, they share subject matter.

We could link them with a conjunction:

“Having one pet cat is good **but** two cats would be even better.”

Or, we could use a semicolon:

“Having one pet cat is good; two cats would be even better.”

Used in this way, a semicolon is essentially a little pause; a bit longer than a comma break; not as long as a full stop break.

Don't use a semi colon to join two unrelated sentences:

“Having one pet cat is good; I like ice cream too.”

And never be tempted to use both a conjunction and a semicolon; **because** they don't sit well together. So:

1. Only link clauses which could be sentences on their own
2. Never use a semicolon with a conjunction (and, but, because etc)
3. Only link related sentences

But wait, there is more!

Semicolons are invaluable in writing lists, where using commas would only serve to confuse:

“My favourite three cats have been Perdita, a long-haired pedigree, Georgie, a muddy-coloured tortoiseshell and Scratch, a free-sprited tabby.”

There are far too many commas in here to form a clear sentence. Help straighten it out by using a semicolon to split the three sections:

“My favourite three cats have been Perdita, a long-haired pedigree; Georgie, a muddy-coloured tortoiseshell; and Scratch, a free-sprited tabby.”