

## Semicolons: An elegant pause — or merely a 'pretentious comma'?<sup>1</sup>

For and against the semicolon:

### For

Sometimes you get a glimpse of a semicolon coming, a few lines further on, and it is like climbing a steep path through woods and seeing a wooden bench just at a bend in the road ahead, a place where you can expect to sit for a moment, catching your breath.

**Lewis Thomas, late US physician and educator**

I feel I don't understand them but am rather attached to them. I do not feel I have any rule that applies to when to put them in, and I've always been baffled by being edited by anybody who had a very strong idea about when to put them in. I put them in with breathing rhythms or a feeling that the meaning has slightly changed direction, and I want a stop as opposed to a pause.

I would hate them to disappear. I write by rhythms, both the rhythm of the meaning and the rhythm of the - it's not exactly my spoken voice, it's the voice inside my head, and that needs a lot of different punctuation marks. At the other end of the scale, I use a lot of dashes, which people try to turn into more respectable things like commas and full stops and so forth. But I love semicolons and colons, and I love that idea of a colon followed by a dash when you're about to begin an argument, which has completely gone.

**AS Byatt**

I love it; it is useful for many things. My understanding is, it is correctly used to join two complete, but related sentences; this way, the reader feels the link, albeit subtly. I love it so much, in fact, that I am currently writing a story made up of only semi-colons; it is quite a challenge, but I believe in it very much.

**George Saunders**

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/apr/04/france.britishidentity>

## Against

No semicolons. Semicolons indicate relationships that only idiots need defined by punctuation. Besides, they are ugly.

**Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing***

I had decided about this time that the semicolon is an unnecessary stop and that I would write my next book without one.

**George Orwell, quoted in Lynne Truss's, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves***

They are more powerful more imposing more pretentious than a comma but they are a comma all the same. They really have within them deeply within them fundamentally within them the comma nature.

**Gertrude Stein**

## Undecided

I like the idea of semicolons, but I generally find myself deleting them during the revision process and using commas, periods or colons instead. Part of the problem is that they don't show up well on a computer screen and if you're reading quickly, the sentences that use them look odd.

**Zoë Heller**

I always feel a little bit dubious about it, but I do use it. I somehow feel that one ought to manage without it. What I use it for is really as though I were reading aloud, for the pause which is like a comma only rather more so. The semicolon is, to me, a sort of extra-strong comma. I think of writing entirely in terms of its rhythm, and reading it aloud in one's head, and there are pauses longer than a comma indicates, and I think a semicolon does for that.

**Diana Athill**

*Modified excerpt from John Henley's "The end of the line?" Published in The Guardian, April 4, 2008.*