

Civil Engineering Writing Project - Grammar & Mechanics Lesson 5

Semi-colons (;)

1. Objectives

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

use a semi-colon correctly.

avoid and correct inaccurate and ineffective uses of semi-colons.

2. Semi-colons in lists that have punctuation within them – obligatory!

In civil engineering writing, there is only one situation where semi-colons are effective and must be used. Semi-colons separate items in a list when those items have commas or other punctuation within them.

Correct Examples	Explanations
<p>1. <u>From a student memo summarizing a meeting</u> Present at meeting were Jessica Choi, U.S. Department of Transportation; Farid Akhtar, ABC Engineering; Joy Campineau and Fred Lincoln, XYZ Engineering; and Rima McNeil and Noah Atkinson of Capstone Group Z.</p> <p>2. <u>From a practitioner proposal</u> We have assigned Manuel Baez as our proposed project manager. With over 18 years of engineering experience, Manuel has successfully completed design, permitting and construction administration efforts for over 20 reservoirs with capacities ranging from 200,000 gallons to 80 million gallons (MG); a 150-million-gallon-per-day (mgd) water treatment plant; two earth-fill dams designed to modern seismic codes; and water transmission mains up to 96 inches in diameter.</p>	<p>The semi-colons divide the names + affiliations because there are commas within the list.</p> <p>Semi-colons are used to divide the list of water projects because there is punctuation within the list items (parentheses, commas, and hyphens). Notice that only commas are used in the simple list of <i>design, permitting, and construction administration efforts</i>.</p>

3. Semi-colons connecting sentences – be careful!

Semi-colons can connect two sentences that are short and closely related. However, this use is rare in civil engineering writing. It is effective only when sentences are very short and have an important meaning relationship, such as cause-effect or contrast. If you connect sentences with a semi-colon, also use a transition word (such as *therefore* or *however*) to make the relationship explicit so your readers do not have to guess your meaning.

If you express two distinct ideas, even if they are short, use typical punctuation between the sentences - a period.

Correct and Effective	Explanation
<p>1. <u>Example from a practitioner proposal</u> We inspected the bascule bridge rehabilitations, including painting and weld repairs on Portola Avenue and Davenport Boulevard over the Red River in the Lincoln City. The structures are over a busy shipping channel; therefore, the work was completed during the winter shut down.</p>	<p>The second and third sentence are short. They have a cause-effect relationship made explicit with <i>therefore</i>. The semi-colon is effective. A period would also be effective.</p>

Grammatically Correct but Ineffective	Explanation
<p>2. From a student report</p> <p>The relationship between Soil Behavior Types and hydraulic conductivities can be seen in Table D-2. The quaternary alluvial deposits are classified as clay, which has a hydraulic conductivity of 1×10^{-10} to 1×10^{-9} (m/s); furthermore, the underlying Puente Formation is likely to be the silty sand layer which was encountered at a depth of 30-40 feet below the ground surface, and it has a hydraulic conductivity of 1×10^{-5} to 1×10^{-6} (m/s).</p>	<p>Two features make this semi-colon ineffective: (1) It connects two long sentences. (2) Although the two layers were adjacent, the ideas in the sentences do not have an important meaning relationship such as cause-effect or contrast. The second sentence is just additional information.</p> <p>This semi-colon should be changed to a period.</p>

4. Common Errors to Avoid

1. Do not use a semi-colon to introduce a list of items. Instead, use a colon.

Incorrect: The calibration of the Charpe testing machine was verified. Then samples were tested in the following order; room air, cold, hot.

Correct: The calibration of the Charpe testing machine was verified. Then samples were tested in the following order: room air, cold, hot.

2. Do not use a semi-colon to separate phrases or dependent clauses from the rest of the sentence. Use a comma or no punctuation (see the comma unit for more on comma use).

Incorrect: Given the data in Table 1, Table 2 and Figure 1; the fineness modulus appears to include some measurement errors.

Correct: Given the data in Table 1, Table 2 and Figure 1, the fineness modulus appears to include some measurement errors.

Incorrect: Figure 1 is a geologic map of the area surrounding the landslide area. The map displays the geologic conditions; with the basalt layers in darker colors.

Correct: Figure 1 is a geologic map of the area surrounding the landslide area. The map displays the geologic conditions with the basalt layers in darker colors.

3. Do not overuse semi-colons to join sentences because you are trying to look smart.

Effective writing has one main idea per sentence. Don't needlessly join ideas and sentences with semi-colons. You will make reading slower and less efficient for your audience. Readers are happier when they can read fast.

Ineffective: Ms. Bey has been directly involved with 24 planning studies, 12 of which have been for water systems; these projects included all facets of water systems, including raw water intakes, wells, springs, pump stations, reservoirs, treatment facilities, pipelines, hydraulic controls, hydraulic modeling, pressure zone adjustments, permitting, financial planning and siting evaluations; and these projects have served communities ranging from predominantly residential to highly industrial.

Effective: Ms. Bey has been directly involved with 24 planning studies, 12 of which have been for water systems. These projects included all facets of water systems, including raw water intakes, wells, springs, pump stations, reservoirs, treatment facilities, pipelines,

hydraulic controls, hydraulic modeling, pressure zone adjustments, permitting, financial planning and siting evaluations. These projects have served communities ranging from predominantly residential to highly industrial.

Practice

For each example, place a ✓ in the column to show whether the semi-colon use is (1) grammatically correct and effective, (2) grammatically correct but ineffective, or (3) grammatically incorrect. Then, for each item that is ineffective or incorrect, write an effective revision.

	1	2	3
1. In the simulation, motor vehicles saw improved conditions from the installation of the bike scramble light compared to the base model. Throughput remained very close to the base model (within 1%); while average vehicle delay and average queue length went down.			
2. Most level of service (LOS) standards call for roads to be widened to help improve LOS grades; however, this is not always feasible.			
3. The following metals were reported in the soil samples at concentrations less than their respective TTLC values; arsenic, barium, cadmium, chromium, cobalt, copper, lead, molybdenum, nickel, vanadium, and zinc. [TTLC = Total Threshold Limit Concentration]			
4. Our group will use modern tools and techniques to properly survey the site. The water level of the site will be ascertained using specialized software; this software will also help in estimating the storm water runoff for the project area. The group will also obtain any permits needed to further the production of the project; in addition, members of the team will present updated plans of the project to the community.			
5. It is important to know the moisture content to understand the way the soil will respond to different situations; for example, the added load of a structure.			
6. The recommendations contained in this report are based on field observations; laboratory testing; engineering analysis; and experience with similar soil conditions.			
7. The solids retention time is 96.06 hr; the hydraulic retention time is 4 hr.			
8. The new bridge is only for buses, light rail trains, cyclists and pedestrians. The deck of the bridge is only a foot thick; which is very thin for a bridge.			
9. In my current position, my duties include managing the process flow for bid tracking; assisting the project manager in reviewing plans, specifications, and submittals; contributing to the development of cost estimates; and providing technical support for staff members.			
10. Sidewalks and crosswalks enhance pedestrian safety; vehicle designs, traffic signals, and traffic laws enhance driver safety.			

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