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Part I: Joining Independent Clauses

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CREATING SEPARATION AND EMPHASIS IN YOUR WRITING PART I: JOINING INDEPENDENT CLAUSES

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I admit: I am a punctuation nerd. I celebrate National Punctuation Day by decorating cupcakes with various punctuation marks and hoping someone will give me a grammar guide as a gift. I mentally insert serial commas into lists when I am speaking. My favorite blog is the Society for the Protection of Good Grammar (you should check it out: http://grammatically.blogspot.com), and I am a fan of the Chicago Manual of Style on Facebook.

I admit, I am also a realist. I understand that not everyone has a love affair with punctuation. However, I believe that those who write for a living understand how punctuation can lend an elegance to writing by creating emphasis and suggesting the relatedness of ideas. I believe busy writers want to stretch beyond the comma and period, to use a dash or a semi-colon with panache (and to use them correctly!). So, here is the first of a two-part guide on how to join and emphasize your ideas. We will get to using punctuation to add emphasis within a sentence in another essay. This essay covers joining ideas contained in separate sentences, or independent clauses for my fellow grammar nerds.

First, some background. Independent clauses each have a subject and a verb and could stand alone as a grammatically correct sentence. For instance, “I enjoy walking on the beach,” “I disliked the hot, humid weather,” and “I presented at a legal writing conference in Florida last summer.” I enjoyed walking on the beach, but I disliked the hot humid weather.

This choice leaves the most separation between the ideas, suggesting to the reader that each sentence is a complete thought, separate from the previous sentence and the next sentence. In this instance, the context of having the ideas in the same paragraph is all that suggests a relationship between them to the reader. In other words, the terminal punctuation—the period—is like a bow on a present. (Hopefully, that present is the newest edition of the Chicago Manual of Style!) A gift recipient knows that the entire gift is under that bow just as a reader knows that an entire thought comes before the period.

**Semi-colon**

I could also choose to show the reader that some of my ideas are more closely related to each other, that my thoughts are fluid, and that more information is coming by using a semi-colon.

I presented at a legal writing conference in Florida last summer. I enjoyed walking on the beach. I disliked the hot humid weather.

Here I haven’t added any new ideas, but this choice lets the reader know that my thoughts are fluid. It creates a subtle sense of anticipation for the reader, showing them that there is more to come after “beach.” It also creates in the reader the sense that clarification is coming.

This option is like wrapping the Aspen Handbook for Legal Writers: A Practical Reference and The Redbook: A Manual on Legal Style separately and then putting one ribbon and bow on the two presents. Just as I would know the presents were related through the use of one ribbon, the reader knows that the two go closely together through the use of the semi-colon.

If you choose this option be careful to use the semi-colon correctly. Semi-colons can be used only to join two independent clauses. The information on each side of the semi-colon must be able to stand alone as a grammatically correct sentence. For instance, “I enjoy walking on the beach; but dislike heat and humidity” is not grammatically correct because “but dislike heat and humidity” lacks a subject and cannot stand alone as a sentence. However, “I enjoyed walking on the beach” and “I disliked the hot, humid weather” could each be a correct sentence, so it is acceptable to join them with a semi-colon.

**A comma with a coordinating conjunction**

Finally, I could join the ideas by using a comma with a coordinating conjunction (more on what these are in a minute).

I presented at a legal writing conference in Florida last summer. I enjoyed walking on the beach, but I disliked the hot, humid weather.
This option more strongly links the final two ideas for the reader. The comma lets the reader know my thought isn’t finished, and the coordinating conjunction “but” explicitly tells the reader the relationship between the two ideas. It also distributes the emphasis between the ideas equally, creating very little separation between them. Neither the first nor the second clause is emphasized. Instead, the comma lets the reader know that the idea before and the idea after the comma are equally important. Like shaking a present and hearing two distinct rattles inside lets you know that there are two parts to a gift inside the package, the comma here lets you know that the two ideas are closely related.

Another word of warning: a comma can be used to join two independent clauses only if you use a coordinating conjunction after the period and before the independent clause. There are seven coordinating conjunctions: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so. Use the mnemonic “FANBOYS” to help you remember them.

**Rewriting**

Of course, I may decide that none of the punctuation options creates the emphasis that I want or shows the reader the relationship between your ideas. In that instance, I could choose to rewrite the ideas to subordinate the less important idea and create a subordinate clause.

I presented at a legal writing conference in Florida last summer. While I enjoyed walking on the beach, I disliked the hot, humid weather.

This option links the ideas in the final two clauses even more closely than the comma; my use of “while” subordinates the enjoyment of the beach and emphasizes my dislike of humidity. Had I felt that my enjoyment of the beach was more important than my discomfort in the weather, I could have written, “While I disliked the hot, humid weather, I enjoyed walking on the beach.”

**Conclusion**

So, while you may have gift ideas beyond grammar guides and citation manuals, I hope this essay has helped you understand how to correctly and more elegantly link the ideas in your writing.

**Sources**


**About the Author**

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff is a member of the Idaho State Bar. She clerked for Justice Roger Burdick of the Idaho Supreme Court and taught Legal Research and Writing, Advanced Legal Research, and Intensive Legal Writing at the University of Oregon School of Law. She is also the author of Idaho Legal Research, a book designed to help law students, new attorneys, and paralegals navigate the intricacies of researching Idaho law.

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