Semicolon ;-)

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Kurt Vonnegut reportedly informed a university crowd that semicolons have no other function than to “show that you’ve been to college.”

Formally introduced to the printed page in 1494 by the Italian printer Aldus Manutius, the semicolon has been misunderstood, misused, and recently missing from most medical writing. Ironically, semicolons are now more commonly used by teenagers to wink at friends when text-messaging [e.g., CU L8R ;-)]. More forceful than a comma and different in function from a colon, the semicolon is an ideal punctuation mark in a today’s high-speed age, in which brevity is prized and clunky writing should be avoided. Consider substituting a semicolon for the conjunction “and” the next time you link two independent

clauses in a single sentence, as demonstrated by the following examples.

Example 1: The toxicology service recommended emergent hemodialysis to treat the patient’s methanol poisoning, **and** the renal service agreed after much debate.

Example 2: The toxicology service recommended emergent hemodialysis to treat the patient’s methanol poisoning; the renal service agreed after much debate.

Both instances are technically correct, but example 2 reduces the number of words on the page, requires less breath to read out loud, and impresses readers ;-). Let’s reclaim the semicolon from our teenagers’ text-messages by reintroducing this neglected form of punctuation into our scientific writing.

Editor’s Note: Dr. Mycyk is an ACMT member who holds a Bachelor’s degree in English from Harvard University.