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MEMORANDUM

To: New York City sixth graders

From: William G. Connolly, co-author with Allan M. Siegal of The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage

Subject: Semicolons

The New York City school system has just issued a series of guides; the guides outline what you should know after completing each grade. Schools Chancellor Rudy Crew says the guides are very clear and simple; he says that even adults can understand them.

In the grammar section, the guide for the sixth grade says that you should know about sentences; you should know that subjects and verbs must agree in number; you should understand verb tenses. The guide also says that you should know about punctuation; you should know how to use commas, which set off parenthetical things; colons, which introduce lists; and quotation marks, which surround the words of other people, recorded exactly.

The guide also says that you should learn about semicolons, and this will be great news for adults; they will be very happy. Most adults have not used semicolons in a long time; they have not thought about semicolons since they were in the sixth grade themselves.

Many of the adults who know nothing about semicolons are very successful. Some are doctors, people who have earned the highest academic degrees; lawyers, graduates of the most prestigious schools; or chief executive officers, masters of the corporate world. Some are even -- this will surely surprise you -- journalists.

What all of these things mean is that if you do well in your studies this year, you will know something that most adults (even adults who earn a living by writing) don't know; you will understand semicolons.

Now, you should be warned that a few adults do understand semicolons; other adults just think they understand. The newly revised Times style manual explains semicolons as well as many other things writers and editors at this newspaper should know. Here's an interesting thought: When you finish the sixth grade, you will be able to look at that book and decide whether I (one of many people who worked on the manual) understand semicolons or just think I do.

If you can do that, it will be a marvelous thing; it will be a historic moment in the annals of punctuation, as the sports writers would put it; it will represent a fundamental shift in the world's attitude toward language and thought, the foreign correspondents would write; it will suggest a new attitude toward and respect for education, the national staff

might say; and here at home it would probably be interpreted as one more bit of evidence that New York is on a roll.

Unfortunately, your achievement will not mean that you will be able to set your own curfew, but it is a good thing; it is called progress.

The experts, if there were any, would agree that there has not been much semicolonic progress in the last generation or two; adults haven't paid nearly enough attention; they have relegated the semicolon to a burner behind those occupied by the comma, the period and even the colon. Do not feel guilty about this; it's not your fault.

There's just one other matter to discuss here; it is how to use the semicolon. The rules for this sort of thing sometimes change over the years, but we can settle this question now in just a couple of sentences; doing so will save you a lot of trouble later in the year.

You don't have to know much about the semicolon; it has only two basic uses. It can separate two closely related statements in a sentence that does not use "and." It can also separate the items in a series when one item includes a comma. A semicolon does other things in headlines, but that is a different matter; you may not have to learn that, even in college.

On to the seventh grade!