



WRITING CENTER

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Correcting Common Errors in Sentence Structure: Comma Splices ... Sentence Fragments ... Run-ons

Your great ideas deserve to be expressed clearly and smoothly! Effective word choice is only one part of this; you must also arrange those words in a way that is correct, logical, and inviting to the reader. This can be difficult, and even skillful writers struggle with sentence structure. Below, you will find advice on how to identify and correct common mistakes of this sort. Knowing how to repair disruptive comma splices, distracting sentence fragments, and confusing run-ons will leave your writing more precise and polished, easing composition and comprehension.

Understanding and Eliminating Comma Splices

The verb “splice” generally refers to things like film and wires, and is basically the practice of putting things together. Unlike splices of film and wire, which help directors tell stories and electricians make repairs, comma splices actually disrupt the flow of your writing, obscuring the relationship between ideas.

Tell me, please, what is a comma splice?

Comma splices entail the incorrect use of a comma (hence: *comma splice*) to join two (or more) independent clauses together in a single sentence. An independent clause is a part of a sentence that could stand alone. [Note: Although they can look alike and often coexist, a comma splice is not the same thing as a run-on sentence.]

So, for example, this sentence contains a comma splice:

I adopted a very cute new puppy, he ate my very expensive shoes.
(Independent clause) (,) (Independent clause)

Okay, so I know what a comma splice is. Is there a good way to find them in my papers?

Go through your paper and find all the commas. Look at the text before and after them. Could the clause preceding it work as a complete sentence? Does the clause following it have all the elements of a complete sentence? If you answered “yes” to both of these questions, you have a comma splice. By the way, if you answered “no” on both counts, you may have a fragment (lucky for you, there’s information on fragments below).

Oh no! I found a comma splice. How do I correct it?

You have several options. Simply select the one that sounds best in a particular instance.

- Replace the comma with a semicolon

Incorrect: We have hundreds of pages of reading to do, it will be impossible to finish it all before the exam.

Correct: We have hundreds of pages of reading to do; it will be impossible to finish it all before the exam.

[Note: Be sure you don't get too excited and accidentally use a semicolon to separate an independent clause from a dependent one.]

- Divide the comma-spliced sentence into smaller sentences, replacing the erroneous comma with appropriate ending punctuation.

Incorrect: She wished she had some ice cream and because it was raining, she asked her roommate to drive her to the store, but she refused.

Correct: She wished she had some ice cream. Because it was raining, she asked her roommate to drive her to the store, but she refused.

[Note: This option can be especially effective in situations where one clause is rather long and the other is of ordinary length.]

- Insert a coordinating conjunction after the comma. In case you don't know what a coordinating conjunction is, here's a list: *and, but, so, or, nor, for, yet*. Remember that *then* is not a coordinating conjunction.

Incorrect: I tried to clean the house, I gave up and watched soap operas instead.

Correct: I tried to clean the house, but I gave up and watched soap operas instead.

Incorrect: I repaired all the structural errors in my paper, then I turned it in.

Correct: I repaired all the structural errors in my paper, and then I turned it in.

Correct: I repaired all the structural errors in my paper. Then I turned it in.

- Instead of using a comma alone to separate the independent clauses, rearrange the sentence into the following format: INDEPENDENT CLAUSE #1; CONJUNCTIVE ADVERB, INDEPENDENT CLAUSE #2. If you're wondering about conjunctive adverbs, these are some of the most common (though there are certainly more): *however, moreover, consequently, for instance, therefore, nevertheless*.

Incorrect: They wanted to start a band, none of them knew how to sing.

Correct: They wanted to start a band; however, none of them knew how to sing.

Incorrect: Semicolons are my favorite kind of punctuation, they work especially well with conjunctive adverbs.

Correct: Semicolons are my favorite kind of punctuation; moreover, they work especially well with conjunctive adverbs.

Spotting and Correcting Sentence Fragments

A sentence fragment is a group of words masquerading as a complete sentence. Sentence fragments, as incomplete sentences, can confuse your reader or make your meaning unclear.

If I find a run-on in my writing, what should I do?

Many of the same strategies that we use for correcting comma splices can be employed here.

- Separate the independent clauses into two sentences.

Correct: They gossiped about many things at lunch. They always have the most to say about their coworkers.

- If the ideas expressed in the clauses are connected, they can be joined with a semi-colon.

Correct: They gossiped about many things at lunch; they always have the most to say about their coworkers.

- Subordinate one of the clauses. That is, first employ a word or phrase as a subordinator like *although*, *while*, *because*, and *whereas*. Then, add commas where needed, and go from there.

Correct: Although they gossiped about many things at lunch, they always have the most to say about their coworkers.

[Note: Employing a subordinator can change the tone or feeling of your sentence, so keep that in mind if you choose this option.]