

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 the writing process; 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 some advice on how to identify and correct common mistakes of this sort.

Knowing how to identify and 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 tying or joining 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 locate all the commas. Look at the text before and after the comma. Could the preceding clause work as a complete sentence? Does the clause following the comma contain all the elements of a complete sentence such as a subject or a verb?

If you answered “yes” to both of these questions, then you have a comma splice. By the way, if you answered “no” on both counts, you may not have a comma splice, **however** you may have a sentence fragment (lucky for you, there’s information on fragments later in the document).

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

You have several options. Simply select the one that best fits your situation or needs.



Replace the comma with a semicolon. This is a great option if your two independent clauses are conceptually connected or in contrast with each other.

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 an easy way to remember them: **FANBOYS** For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So. (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, and 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. Although common in popular speech, in writing sentence fragments can confuse your reader and make your meaning unclear.

For example, the following passage contains two sentence fragments:

I learned about sentence structure. The common mistakes. The best ways to correct them.
(Complete sentence) (Fragment) (Fragment)

Is there an easy way to test for sentence completeness?

Thankfully, there is an easy way to test for sentence completeness.

Ask the following questions of every sentence in your writing:

- Is there a verb (action word)?
- Is there a subject (who or what is the sentence about)?
- If the phrase starts with a **subordinating** word (like “because” or “since”), does it also include an independent clause to complete the thought?

Example: Since it is raining, we should dance outside.

If you answered “no” to any of these questions, you’ve got yourself a sentence fragment. Fortunately, sentence fragments are easily remedied.

How can I fix my fragments?

There are two main ways to repair sentence fragments.

Expand the fragments into sentences, supplying the missing elements like subjects, verbs, and clauses.

Incorrect: Confusing and distracting to readers.

Correct: Sentence fragments are confusing and distracting to readers.

Incorrect: Because they are confusing and distracting to readers.

Correct: Because they are confusing and distracting to readers, writers should generally avoid sentence fragments.

Incorporate the fragment into a nearby sentence.

Incorrect: The dog was waiting in the window when his owner got home. Then, excited, wagging his tail. He went to greet her at the door.

Correct: The dog was waiting in the window when his owner got home. Excited, he wagged his tail and went to greet her at the door.

I've noticed that sometimes sentence fragments appear in books and magazine articles. Should I call the authors and let them know that they're making mistakes?

Some professional writers use fragments (sparingly) for emphasis and effect. Although “flourishes” like this can energize your writing, it is a good idea to avoid them unless/until you have demonstrated your ability to compose sentences that are complete and free of structural errors. Some types of writing – such as research – will never include sentence fragments.

Finding and Fixing **Run-On Sentences**

A run-on sentence is a sentence in which several main clauses are strung together without proper punctuation. Without punctuation, the clauses run together as if they were one sentence. Run-on sentences make your reader’s job difficult; they interrupt the rhythm of your writing and condense too much information into a small space.

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 for run-on sentences.

Separate the independent clauses into two sentences.

- **Incorrect:** They gossiped about many things at lunch they always have the most to say about their coworkers. (Independent clause) (Independent clause)
- **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, since, because, or 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.