

Avoiding Run-On Sentences, Comma Splices, and Fragments

Understanding sentence structure helps in identifying and correcting run-on sentences and sentence fragments. A computer's spell checker does not typically catch these common mistakes, so do not rely on the spell checker to correct grammar for you. Be sure to carefully proofread all assignments for these issues.

This handout defines various sentence structures, presents sample sentences, and provides strategies for correcting run-ons, comma splices, and fragments. Practice activities are included to help build skills in sentence clarity and variety.

First, consider the parts of a complete sentence:

Complete Sentence (Independent Clause)

A complete sentence has (minimally) two parts, a subject and a verb. A sentence must also express a complete thought. Such a phrase consisting of a subject and a verb (with complete meaning) is also called an *independent clause*.

Example: He writes music.

This sentence has a subject and verb. This sentence also expresses a complete thought, so its meaning is clear.

he=subject (S) writes=verb (V) music=direct object (DO)

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Part I: Run-On Sentences

Definition: A run-on sentence either has too many independent clauses or two independent clauses that are not linked correctly.

Two types of run-on sentences are *fused sentences* and *comma splices*.

1. Fused Sentence

Definition: A fused sentence consists of two independent clauses, but both the comma and coordinating conjunction are missing.

Example of a Fused Sentence: She writes the music he plays the guitar.

'*She writes the music*' and '*he plays the guitar*' are each independent clauses, containing a subject and a verb and expressing complete thoughts. '*He plays the guitar*' is an independent clause that can stand alone because it expresses a complete thought and is grammatically correct.

he=subject (S) plays=verb (V) guitar=direct object (DO)

However, in the above example, the independent clause, '*She writes the music,*' incorrectly runs into a second independent clause, '*he plays the guitar.*'

Strategies for Correcting Fused Sentences:

1. Create a compound sentence.

Inserting a coordinating conjunction (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*) plus a comma correctly links these independent clauses. This sentence structure is called a compound sentence.

Correct compound sentence: She writes the music, *and* he plays the guitar.

independent clause + comma + coordinating conjunction + independent clause

2. Separate independent clauses with periods and capitalization, creating simple sentences.

Correct sentences: She writes the music. He plays the guitar.

3. Insert a semi-colon.

Semi-colons should be used sparingly and to connect independent clauses whose meanings are closely related.

Correct sentence: She writes the music for Coldplay; he plays the guitar for that band.

* Note: When more details are added to the above independent clauses, the meanings become much more closely related. Thus, a semi-colon can separate these clauses.

4. Link ideas using a subordinate clause (dependent clause).

Correct Sentence:

While she writes the music for Coldplay, he plays the guitar for that band.

subordinate clause + comma + independent clause

'*While*' is a subordinating conjunction, which makes '*while she writes music for Coldplay,*' a dependent clause. That is, the clause *depends* on the rest of the sentence for

the overall meaning to be clear. A dependent clause cannot stand alone. Use a comma to separate a dependent clause that appears *before* an independent clause.

***Note:** A sentence constructed of one independent clause and one or more dependent (or subordinate) clauses is called a complex sentence.

2. Comma Splice

Definition: A comma splice consists of two or more independent clauses that follow one another and are incorrectly linked together only with a comma (or commas). The coordinating conjunction is missing.

Example of a Comma Splice: She writes the music, he plays the guitar.

In the above sentence, a comma separates the two independent clauses, but a coordinating conjunction is also necessary.

Strategies for Correcting Comma Splices:

1. Insert a coordinating conjunction to create a compound sentence.

Correct Sentences:

She writes the music for Coldplay, **but** he plays the guitar for that band.

She writes the music for Coldplay, **and** he plays the guitar for that band.

Remember, the coordinating conjunction appears *after* the comma.

***Note:** Again, consider meaning before joining sentences. If the sentences are not closely connected, it may be best to keep them separate. Think about these two independent clauses:

Today I was late for class.

I will have a burrito for dinner tonight.

Since these ideas are distinct, keep the sentences separate.

2. Insert a semi-colon.

Correct Sentence: She writes the music for Coldplay; he plays the guitar for that band.

Again, to join two independent clauses with a semi-colon, be sure that their meanings are closely connected. The Tutoring Center has a separate handout on semi-colon usage.

*** See pages 4-7 for further explanation of these strategies as well as sample sentences and practice activities.**

Practice: Avoiding Run-Ons

Correct the following run-on sentences by using the strategies previously discussed.

1. I moved to the United States when I was young it was easy to learn English, my parents were already here, they knew English already.

2. Juan and David recognized each other they had been in the first grade together.

3. Her car would not start she was late for class.

4. The parents ate the baby slept in her stroller.

5. Eli wants to quit smoking this habit is too expensive.

Avoiding Run-Ons: Answer Key and Explanations

1. I moved to the United States when I was young it was easy to learn English, my parents were already here, they knew English.

Strategy 1: Period + Capital Letter (Separate Sentences)

I moved to the United States when I was young.
 S + V (prepositional phrase) (dependent clause)

It was easy to learn English.
 S + V (adverb phrase)

My parents were already here. They knew English.
 S + V (adverb phrase) S + V (direct object)

Strategy 2: Coordinating Conjunction + Comma (Compound Sentence)

I moved to the United States when I was young, and it was easy to learn English.
 S + V , and S + V

My parents were already here, so they knew English.
 S + V , so S + V

Strategy 3: Semi-Colon

I moved to the United States when I was young; it was easy to learn English.
 S + V ; S + V

My parents were already here; they knew English.
 S + V ; S + V

Strategy 4: Subordination (Complex Sentence)

Because I moved to the United States when I was young, it was easy to learn English.
 (dependent clause) + , S + V

Because is a subordinating conjunction that makes the first clause dependent on the second clause. Do not use a coordinating conjunction to link a dependent clause and an independent clause; rather, use only a comma. For example: Since my parents were already here, they knew English.

***Note:** This run-on sentence can also be corrected using a combination of the above strategies.
 I moved to the United States when I was young, so it was easy to learn English. (compound sentence)
 Because my parents were already here, they knew English. (complex sentence)

More suggested answers:

2. Juan and David recognized each other; they had been in the first grade together.
S + V ; S + V (prepositional phrase)

Juan and David recognized each other, for they had been in the first grade together.
S + V , for S + V

Since they had been in the first grade together, Juan and David recognized each other.
Since + dependent clause , S + V

Juan and David recognized each other. They had been in the first grade together.
S + V. S + V

Now it's starting to make sense:

3. Her car would not start, so she was late for class.

Her car would not start, and she was late for class.

Her car would not start. She was late for class.

Because her car would not start, she was late for class.

Her car would not start; she was late for class. (correct, but not the best choice)

4. *While* the parents ate, the baby slept in her stroller.

The parents ate *as* the baby slept in her stroller.

The parents ate. The baby slept in her stroller.

The parents ate, and the baby slept in her stroller.

The parents ate; the baby slept in her stroller.

5. Eli wants to quit smoking. This habit is too expensive.

Eli wants to quit smoking; this habit is too expensive.

Eli wants to quit smoking, *for* this habit is too expensive.

Since this habit is too expensive, Eli wants to quit smoking.

A more logical, concise construction using subordination would read as follows:

Since smoking is too expensive, Eli wants to quit.

Part II: Sentence Fragments

Definition: A sentence fragment is an incomplete sentence. Most fragments are missing the *subject*, the *verb*, or both. Identifying some fragments can be confusing because they may actually contain a subject and a verb. However, these nouns and verbs *do not form an independent clause when they follow subordinating conjunctions, adverbs, or relative pronouns.* (See below for an explanation of these terms.)

Example of a sentence fragment: After the party starts.
party=subject starts=verb

This phrase has a noun and a verb; however, the subordinating conjunction ‘*after*’ makes it a dependent clause. Therefore, this dependent clause needs to be linked to an independent clause.

Correct sentence: After the party starts, I will be able to relax. (complex sentence)

‘*I will be able to relax*’ is an independent clause that can stand alone. It expresses a complete thought. Remember to separate a dependent clause and an independent clause with a comma (when the dependent clause appears *before* the independent clause).

There are several types of fragments. See pages 9-11 for detailed explanations and techniques for correcting fragments. Pages 12-13 include practice activities and an answer key.

Types of Fragments

Each example below illustrates a different type of sentence fragment. *Any* fragment can be corrected by linking the fragment to an independent clause—one which comes before or after it *and* which makes sense within the paragraph.

1. Subordinating Conjunction and Relative Pronoun Fragments

Example:

While I was waiting for my car to be repaired.

How to find this type of fragment:

When proofreading a paper, pay attention to subordinating conjunctions and relative pronouns. These words (see box below) turn subjects and verbs into dependent clauses. Identifying proper usage of dependent clauses can help in recognizing fragments.

Examples of Subordinating Conjunctions and Relative Pronouns

after	how	unless	whichever
although	if	until	while
as	in order that/to	what	whether
as if	once	whatever	who
as soon as	rather than	when	whoever
as though	since	whenever	whom
because	so that	where	whomever
before	than	whereas	whose
even if	that	wherever	why
even though	though	which	

Strategies for correcting subordinating conjunction and relative pronoun fragments:

1. Connect the fragment to the sentence that comes before or after it.

Correct Sentences:

While I was waiting for my car to be repaired, I read a magazine.
dependent clause , S + V

Notice the use of the comma after the dependent clause (because the dependent clause falls at the *beginning* of the sentence).

I had to ride the bus while I was waiting for my car to be repaired.
 S + V *dependent phrase*

***Note:** When a dependent (subordinate) clause comes after the independent clause, it is usually unnecessary to place a comma after that independent clause. Whether or not a comma is needed depends on the meaning of the sentence.

2. Remove the subordinating conjunction/relative pronoun.

Correct sentence:

I was waiting for my car to be repaired.
 S + V

2. “-ing” Fragments

Example:

Her expertise being in chemistry and biology.

How to find an “-ing” fragment:

If the only verb in the sentence ends in ‘-ing’ and *does not have* a helping verb, you have a fragment. While the word ‘being’ is a verb, in the above sentence, it is not properly formed.

In the below sentence, notice that the ‘-ing’ verb has a helping verb:

I *was walking* down the street when it started raining. (This sentence is correct. ‘Was’ functions as the helping verb.)

When added to a verb, ‘-ing’ sometimes makes a verb do the job of a noun:

Walking outdoors is my favorite form of exercise. (In this sentence, ‘walking’ is a noun that functions as the subject. ‘Is’ functions as the main verb.)

Strategies for correcting “ing” fragments:

1. Connect the fragment to the sentence that comes before or after it.

Correct sentences:

Her expertise being in chemistry and biology, she was not hired as an English instructor.
dependent –ing phrase , S + V

She designed the new science exhibit, her expertise being in chemistry and biology.
S + V , *dependent –ing phrase*

2. Correct the verb form.

Correct sentences:

Her expertise *is* in chemistry and biology.

Her expertise *was* in chemistry and biology.

***Note:** Sometimes you will also need to add a subject *and* correct the verb form. See the next page for an example. .

3. Missing Subject Fragments

Example:

Security set off the alarm and evacuated the building. **Next, closed all the entrances.**

How to find this type of fragment:

The second phrase above (noted in bold) is a fragment because there is no subject. ‘Entrances’ is a noun, but it is the *object* of the verb ‘closed.’ *Who* or *what* is closing the entrances is unknown. That is, the subject of the sentence is missing.

Strategies for correcting missing subject fragments:

1. Connect the fragment to the sentence that comes before or after it.

Correct Sentences:

Security set off the alarm, evacuated the building, and closed all the entrances.

In the above sentence, it is clear that the subject, the doer of the actions, is security.

2. Add the missing subject.

Correct Sentence:

Security set off the alarm and evacuated the building. Next, *they* closed all the entrances.

***Note:** In this sentence, the pronoun ‘*they*’ renames the subject, security.

4. “Extra Information” Fragments

Example:

For instance, clean water and electricity.

How to find and fix this type of fragment:

In these kinds of fragments, usually the verb is missing. Watch out for transitional phrases that signal an example, a list, added details, or information, such as those listed in the box below.

Transition Words Indicating a List or Examples

also	especially	except	for instance	including
in addition	furthermore	for example	such as	next

Strategies for correcting “extra information” fragments:

1. Connect the fragment to the sentence that comes before or after it.

Correct sentence:

Many Americans take basic amenities for granted, for example, clean water and electricity.

S + V , *dependent phrase*

2. Add the missing subject and verb.

Correct sentence:

For example, basic amenities include clean water and electricity.

transitional phrase, S + V

Practice: Avoiding Fragments

Correct these sentences using the strategies previously discussed.

1. The dog loved his new toys. Especially the ones that squeaked.

2. Maggie remembered her childhood. Her mother making pancakes for dinner in the small apartment.

3. She decided to meet her new friend in a public place. That they had arranged over e-mail.

4. Because she met him on MySpace. She thought it was a good idea to be cautious.

5. I cannot wait until President's Day. Finally, a day off.

Avoiding Fragments: Answers and Explanations

1. The dog loved his new toys, especially the ones that squeaked.
S + V , dependent clause

The dog loved his new toys. He especially loved the ones that squeaked.
S + V. S + V

2. Maggie remembered her childhood, especially her mother making pancakes for dinner in the small apartment.
S + V, dependent clause

Maggie remembered her childhood. Her mother made pancakes in the small apartment.
S + V. S + V (correct form)

3. She decided to meet her new friend in a public place that they had arranged over email.
S + V dependent clause

She decided to meet her new friend in a public place. They had arranged a place over email.
S + V. S + V

4. Because she met him on MySpace, she thought it was a good idea to be cautious.
dependent clause, S + V

She thought it was a good idea to be cautious; she met him on MySpace.
S + V ; S + V

5. I cannot wait until President's Day, finally, a day off.
S + V, dependent phrase

I cannot wait until President's Day. Finally, we have a day off.
S + V. S + V