



COMMA SPLICES & RUN-ON SENTENCES

The comma splice and run-on (or fused) sentence are major punctuation errors that can commonly show up in your writing. What do these terms mean? How can you correct or avoid these errors?

- ▶ A **comma splice** occurs when *only* a comma separates two independent sentences.
- ▶ A run-on (or fused) sentence occurs when no punctuation at all separates independent sentences.

Let's start with two simple sentences:

Tony is dishonest. He steals hubcaps for a living.

Even though these are simple ideas, both of these statements pass the “independent sentence” test: Each one contains a subject and a verb; each one also expresses a complete thought.

In writing your ideas down, you usually are concerned with the meaning and detail of your sentences and often don't pay enough attention to punctuation, especially where one sentence ends and another begins. That's when you get into trouble with incorrect punctuation, like this:

NO: Tony is dishonest, he steals hubcaps for a living. (comma splice)

NO: Tony is dishonest he steals hubcaps for a living. (run-on sentence)

As you can see in these two sentences, comma splices and run-on sentences are similar mistakes. In both cases, the punctuation (or lack of it) does not indicate complete, independent sentences.

A comma splice or run-on sentence can also occur when you use transition words:

NO: The U.S. Postal Service is usually very reliable, however, sometimes a letter is not delivered for weeks, months, or even years.

Again, there are two independent sentences in the example above. Transition words (like *however*, *therefore*, *nevertheless*, *consequently*, and *then*) cannot be used to connect the two sentences.

Corrected versions of the previous sentences could be:

YES: The U.S. Postal Service is usually very reliable; however, sometimes a letter is not delivered for weeks, months, or even years.

OR

YES: The U.S. Postal Service is usually very reliable. However, sometimes a letter is not delivered for weeks, months, or even years.

Look carefully at the next example. IS THERE A RUN-ON SENTENCE OR COMMA SPLICE PROBLEM IN THE FOLLOWING?

Because Jonathan is very competitive, he sometimes puts too much pressure on himself.

THE ABOVE IS ONE COMPLETE, CORRECTLY PUNCTUATED SENTENCE. Even though both parts of the sentence have a subject and verb, the dependent word *because* keeps the first idea from expressing a complete thought. It is dependent on the second part of the sentence to complete the meaning. Some common dependent words (subordinate conjunctions) are *because, after, although, if, until, since, and while*.

Now that you know how sentences become run-on/fused sentences or comma splices, how do you avoid or correct them? Four basic methods can be used:

1. Use a comma and coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, nor, for, yet, and so*) to form one smooth sentence:

Sentence, and sentence.

NO: Communication is important in every relationship, it's especially important to a newly married couple.

YES: Communication is important in every relationship, **but** it's especially important to a newly married couple.

2. Separate the independent sentences with a semicolon. The semicolon may be used whether or not the second sentence starts with a transitional word or phrase.

Sentence; sentence.

or

Sentence; transition, sentence.

NO: Suddenly, there was complete silence in the boys' room then the mother knew she'd better check on them.

YES: Suddenly, there was complete silence in the boys' room; **then** the mother knew she'd better check on them.

3. Make the independent sentences distinct, using a period and capital letter.

Sentence. Sentence.

NO: Saturday afternoon in Kirkwood is always a busy time everyone seems to be out running errands.

YES: Saturday afternoon in Kirkwood is always a busy time. Everyone seems to be out running errands.

4. Restructure the two sentences as one, using a dependent word to introduce the less important idea.

Dependent word+subject/verb, sentence.

NO The new organizational plan was introduced, the company employees were eager to try it.

YES **When** the new organizational plan was introduced, the company employees were eager to try it.

Besides this handout, the CWC has several worksheets for practice in correcting run-on/fused and comma splice problems. Ask for them and bring them back to have a staff member check over the corrections you've made.

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