

Sentence Fragments, Comma Splices and Run-on Sentences

Fragments, comma splices and run-ons, the most common problems faced by writers, may be caught by proof-reading. Begin with your last sentence and read your paper backwards one sentence at a time. Because the flow of thought is interrupted, you can more easily look at each sentence as a sentence, not as a moment in a stream of ideas, and you will be more likely to catch errors. Remember, a complete sentence has both a subject (someone or something acting) and a verb (an action or state of being).

Sentence Fragments are incomplete sentences. The fragment may be missing a subject, missing a verb, missing both subject and verb, or may begin with a subordinating conjunction. Sentence fragments typically occur because of the misuse of the period.

Dan said he would come. *But spent the day fishing.*

The second group of words is missing a subject—who spent the day fishing? Dan is the subject of the first sentence. Connect the two groups by removing the period, adding a subject, and adding a comma before the coordinating conjunction *but*.

Dan said he would come, but he spent the day fishing.

The baby sleeping soundly. The police officer angered by the driver's attitude.

Both *sleeping* and *angered* require helping verbs. By adding *is* or *was*, the verbs become complete.

The baby is sleeping soundly. The police officer was angered by the driver's attitude.

Americans are very helpful. *Particularly in times of trouble.*

The second group of words has no subject—who is doing something?—and no verb—what is being done? It cannot stand alone as a complete thought. Attach the word group to the preceding sentence with a comma.

Americans are very helpful, particularly in times of trouble.

Which is why I was late.

The word group above is a subordinate clause. It cannot stand alone and must be attached to a complete sentence.

Two cars collided near the high school, which is why I was late.

Watch out! Words (subordinating conjunctions)

after	when	so that	whom	even though
as	how	than	where	although
as if	that	whether	which	in order that
if	why	though	while	rather than
until	since	before	who	because
whose	unless			

Comma splices occur when commas are incorrectly used to join two complete sentences. Each word group has a subject and a verb and expresses a complete thought; therefore, each is a complete sentence. Commas are not strong enough to join two complete sentences.

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The current was swift, he could not swim ashore.

The comma splice can be repaired by three methods:

- Make two sentences by using a period and capitalization.
The current was swift. He could not swim ashore.
- Replace the comma with a semicolon if the ideas are closely related.
The current was swift; he could not swim ashore.
- Insert a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, for, nor, so, yet) after the comma.
The current was swift, so he could not swim ashore.

Run-on sentences, like comma splices, occur when two complete sentences are incorrectly joined. Run-ons often occur when the writer incorrectly uses a coordinating conjunction without a comma to join two sentences.

- *She wrote him a love letter he answered it in person.* Two complete and separate ideas exist. They should be distinguished.
- *She wrote him a love letter and he answered it in person.* Because coordinating conjunctions can be used to join two subjects with a single verb or two verbs with a single subject, a comma must be placed before them when they are used to join two complete sentences.

Run-ons can be corrected using the same techniques as are used to correct comma splices.

- Make two sentences by using a period and capitalization.
She wrote him a love letter. He answered it in person.
- Use a semicolon to join two closely related ideas.
She wrote him a love letter; he answered it in person.
- Place a comma before a coordinating conjunction to join two complete sentences.
She wrote him a love letter, but he answered it in person.