

SSU Writing Center

Ruben Salazar 1008 • 1801 East Cotati Avenue • 664-4401

Fragments, Run-Ons, and Comma Splices: A Few Strategies for Identifying and Fixing Them

Every writer sometimes inadvertently writes fragments, comma splices, and/or run-ons. Indeed, “real writers” frequently write them *on purpose*, for some sort of special effect. However, accidental errors of these kinds frequently communicate to the reader that you haven’t done all the work you need to do to write a great paper.

If you seem frequently to create these kinds of errors in your writing, give yourself time to revise specifically to eliminate them, apart from the general revision you do on the ideas and content of the paper. The best thing you can do is sit down with a tutor to work through the patterns of error you typically follow.

First: Some Definitions

Fragments: There are two kinds of fragments. Some fragments are “incomplete” sentences trying to stand as whole, independent sentences (in each of the following cases, the second sentence is a fragment):

I saw John. Walking toward the mountains in fields of wavy, bronze grass.
I knew where to find the missing jewels. On the bookshelf.

Other fragments are “subordinate” clauses trying to stand independently:

We went to the store. Although we didn’t buy anything.
I would have called. If I had remembered.

Comma Splices: Comma splices are simply two or more complete, independent sentences which are joined by a comma rather than separated by a period or some other “terminal” mark of punctuation.

In the distance there was a commotion, it turned out to be an approaching tornado.
On the bookshelf stood a vase of flowers, they were carnations.

Run-Ons: Run-ons are usually comma splices without the comma separating the two sentences. If you’re not careful about where sentences begin and end, you words can run on and on and on:

In the schoolroom there were desks there were chairs I saw a bookshelf, thee wastebaskets and several chalkboards hung on the walls.

How Do I Correct Fragments, Comma Splices, and Run-Ons?

Fragments: Answering the following questions will help you become conscious of fragments and ways to correct them.

1. Is the sentence a **dependent clause**, which means that it’s subordinate to another sentence and therefore should be part of it? Here’s a short list of some of the most common subordinating words that turn a sentence into a dependent clause:

although as because since though

that unless when where

Once you know that a particular word works as a subordinator, you know that the sentence to which you attach it needs, in turn, to be attached to another sentence:

We went to the store, although we didn't buy anything. ("Although" subordinates the sentence "we didn't buy anything" to the previous sentence.)

2. Can you easily add a tag question at the end? Notice how easy it is to do this with complete sentences:

We went to the store, didn't we?
I would have called, wouldn't I?

Now try to add a tag question to a fragment:

Although we didn't buy anything.
On the bookshelf.

3. If the sentence you suspect might be a fragment extends an idea raised in the previous sentence, do you need a colon rather than a period between the two?

We bought three things at the store. Cookies, candy, and Coke. (Change to ...store: cookies, candy, and Coke.)

4. The ultimate test: does the sentence have a subject and verb and no subordinating words? This sentence has no subject:

Walked to the store.

This one has no verb:

The books on the shelf.

Complete, independent sentences have subjects and verbs and no subordinating words:

Joe walked to the store.
The books stood on the shelf.

Comma Splices and Run-Ons: You might have been told at some point that a sentence makes "a complete thought." Comma splices and run-ons usually happen when your mind is telling you that what you've written equals a complete thought, but the grammar actually makes two or more sentences. When you join two or more sentences with a comma rather than with a period or other "terminal" punctuation, you've written a comma splice:

I went to the store, I bought cookies, candy, and Coke.

And when you simply run sentences together, you've written a run-on:

We walked in the woods I picked you a flower.

You can use the tag-question method to identify comma splices too. Check each clause you think might be a complete sentence to see if you can add a tag question:

I went to the store, didn't I? I bought cookies, candy, and Coke, didn't I?

There are many ways to gracefully link two or more sentences. Here are a few:

1. Join them with a semi-colon. Semi-colons work almost always like periods, separating complete sentences. The difference from periods is simply that semi-colons signal that the second sentence is closely linked to the first, almost making the two sentence one idea.

We walked in the woods; I picked you a flower.

2. Join the sentences with a comma and a coordinating conjunction (and, but, for, nor, or, yet, so):

I went to the store, and I bought cookies, candy, and Coke.

3. Use subordinating words to make one sentence dependent on the other:

When I went to the store, I bought cookies, candy, and Coke.

While walking in the woods, I picked you a flower.

A Brief Quiz

Use a subordinating word to connect the two sentences:

1. The tree had a disease. They cut it down.
2. Writing Center tutors do an excellent job already. They still go to training meetings.
3. The car went over the cliff. It rolled down into the river.
4. The sun didn't come out for weeks. Scott started to get depressed.

Add words and/or punctuation to turn the following fragments into complete sentences:

5. Even though Bob felt like he was going to hurl.
6. Over the river and through the woods.
7. To tell people how you feel.
8. When you care enough to send the very best.

Change punctuation only to eliminate fragments:

9. There was something I really needed to do. Write a letter to my friend Sara.
10. Football. That's the most irritating sport I know of.

Fix run-ons and comma splices:

11. All SSU students should check out the Fairfield Osborn Preserve, it's the coolest natural experience around.
12. Their eyes met from across the room and locked they were in love at first sight.
13. I really hated the new Star Wars movie, all it had in it was special effects the characters had absolutely no personality.
14. I wanted to go fishing, however we compromised and went shopping for new towels instead.
15. Nevertheless, the plan felt risky to me, it involved cutting our cash reserves to the bare minimum.

Add tag phrases, underline subjects once and verbs twice, and determine which of the following sentences are complete and correct (i.e., not fragments, comma splices, or run-ons):

16. Although we went to the fair.
17. Wherever I looked, I simply could not find my car keys, but finally I found them under the dog.
18. SSU needs a new school mascot, I nominate the red-shouldered hawk.
19. Y2K is here now we can start using up all that spaghetti we stockpiled.
20. I knew that Jim liked to dress in women's clothes, however I thought the fishnet stockings went a little too far.
21. Nevertheless, Jim looks really good in rouge.

22. Why don't we go rollerblading I know of a really cool place.
23. It's not that Bill wanted Marjorie to come back to him, it's just that he wished she would bring back his collection of vintage motor oil cans.
24. Yumiko waited a long time for her knee to heal, then she sprained it again while playing fullback in a soccer tournament.
25. Fragments, comma splices, and run-ons can be real bears to learn to identify and fix.