

The Basics

Fragments and Run Ons

This hand-out will help you understand basic sentence structure and will help you avoid common writing errors -- sentence fragments, run ons, and comma splices. You may wish to print this to use as reference when completing assignments.

The Basics

Before we get to the problems with fragments and run ons, let's review some information that is so basic you may have forgotten it.

What is a complete sentence? A complete sentence is not merely a group of words with a capital letter at the beginning and a period or question mark at the end. **A complete sentence has three components:**

1. A subject -- the actor or doer in the sentence.
2. A predicate -- the verb or action.
3. A complete thought -- it can stand alone and make sense -- it's independent.

Some sentences can be very short, with only two or three words expressing a complete thought, like this:

Joan waited.

This sentence has a subject (Joan) and a verb (waited), and it expresses a complete thought. We can understand the idea completely with just those two words, so it is an independent clause. Independent clauses, or complete sentences, can be expanded to contain a lot more information, like this:

Joan waited for the bus all morning.

Joan waited for the bus all morning in the rain last Tuesday.

Wishing she had brought her umbrella, Joan waited for the bus all morning in the rain last Tuesday.

If you look carefully at the examples above you'll see that the main thought is still that Joan waited -- one main subject and one main verb. No matter how long or short the other sentence parts are, none of them can stand alone and make sense.

Being able to find the main subject, the main verb, and the complete thought is the first trick to learn for identifying fragments and run ons.

Dependent Clauses

A dependent clause is a group of words that contains a subject and verb but that does not express a complete thought; it must be accompanied by an independent clause to make complete sense. A dependent clause **depends** upon more information. Here are some examples:

- While you were out
- Before you go

- Because his car was in the shop
- Since I completed the project

Each of the above examples have a subject and a verb. So what makes the thought incomplete? It's the first word (While, Before, Because, Since).

The following words often signal a dependent clause. They are subordinating conjunctions that introduce dependent clauses.

while	after	although	whatever
when	whenever	as soon as	since
before	though	until	till
where	if	as	unless
because	that	which	who

Sentence Fragments

A sentence fragment is an incomplete sentence because it does not make sense. Because dependent clauses have a subject and a verb, they look like complete sentences. However, because they are introduced by a subordinating conjunction, they can't stand on their own. Using a dependent clause alone creates a *sentence fragment*, which is a common writing fault. Here are some examples:

- After he went away to college.
- Which is a beautiful school.
- All that inactivity, all that time.

Sentence fragments are sometimes accepted in creative writing for effect. Their usage, however, is incorrect for most business communication.

How do you find and fix fragments?

1. Remember the basics: subject, verb, and complete thought.
2. Scan your sentences for subordinating conjunctions. When you find one, identify the whole dependent clause (the subject and verb that go with the subordinator), and then make sure they are attached to an independent clause.

Run-ons

A run-on occurs when two independent clauses are joined in one sentence without separating them properly. These are examples of run-on sentences:

- Ryan is an energetic person he plays tennis twice a day.
- She came to the office yesterday she is here again today.

There are many ways to correct run-on sentences:

- You could use a **semicolon**:
 - Ryan is an energetic person; he plays tennis twice a day.
 - She came to the office yesterday; she is here again today.
- You could use a **comma and a conjunction** (for, and, nor but, or, yet, so)
 - Ryan is an energetic person, **so** he plays tennis twice a day.
 - She came to the office yesterday, **and** she is here again today.
- You could use a **subordinating conjunction**:
 - Ryan is an energetic person **because** he plays tennis twice a day.
 - She came to the office yesterday, **although** she is here again today.
- You could make it into **two separate sentences with a period** in between:
 - Ryan is an energetic person. **He** plays tennis twice a day.
 - She came to the office yesterday. **She** is here again today.
- You could use an **em-dash (a long dash)** for emphasis:
 - Ryan is an energetic person -- he plays tennis twice a day.
 - She came to the office yesterday -- she is here again today.

Comma Splice

You CANNOT simply add a comma between the two independent clauses, or you will create a **comma splice**. This occurs when a comma, rather than a conjunction or semicolon, is used between two complete thoughts. These examples are comma splices:

- Ryan is an energetic person, he plays tennis twice a day.
- She came to the office yesterday, she is here again today.

The comma should not be used to separate two independent clauses. This fault is easily corrected the same way you fix a run-on -- either change the punctuation or add a conjunction.

How to Fix a Comma Splice

There are three common ways to fix a comma splice:

Fix #1: Add a Conjunction

One way to fix a comma splice is to add a **conjunction** immediately after the comma. With most comma splices, the conjunction you'll want to add is probably *and*, *but*, or *so*.

- Ryan is an energetic person, **and** he plays tennis twice a day.
- She came to the office yesterday, **but** she is here again today.

Fix #2: Change the Comma to a Semicolon

If adding a conjunction doesn't seem to work, you can change the comma to a **semicolon** instead. Unlike commas, semicolons *are* strong enough to glue two independent clauses together.

- Ryan is an energetic person; he plays tennis twice a day.
- She came to the office yesterday; she is here again today.

If you decide to use a semicolon, make sure there is a close, logical connection between the two independent clauses.

Fix #3: Make Separate Sentences

If adding a conjunction doesn't seem to work and using a semicolon feels too stuffy, you can fix a comma splice by simply making each independent clause a separate sentence.

- Ryan is an energetic person. He plays tennis twice a day.
- She came to the office yesterday. She is here again today.

Fix #4: Use a Dash for Emphasis

If you wish to place the emphasis on the second part of the sentence, you could use an **em-dash (a long dash)** for emphasis:

- Ryan is an energetic person -- he plays tennis twice a day.
- She came to the office yesterday -- she is here again today.