The IUP Writing Center
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FRAGMENTS, RUN-ONS, AND COMMA SPLICES: STRATEGIES FOR IDENTIFYING AND CORRECTING THEM

Sometimes writers inadvertently write fragments, comma splices, and /or run-ons. Professional 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 to frequently 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.

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, your words can run on and on and on:

In the schoolroom there were desks there were chairs I saw a bookshelf, the 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 sentences one idea.

We walked in the woods; I picked a flower.

2. Join the sentences with a **comma and a coordinating conjunction** (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). You can remember the list of conjunctions with the acronym *FANBOYS*.

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 a flower.

Always proofread, revise, and, when possible, sit down with a tutor and talk about your writing.