CHAPTER 46

Comma Splices and Fused Sentences

WRITERS SOMETIMES USE comma splices for special effect in fiction or essays and especially in advertising or on bumper stickers, where they can give slogans a catchy rhythm: Dogs have owners, cats have staff.

CONNECT: When might you choose to use a comma splice for a particular effect? 2a, 46a

CREATE: Keep a log of the comma splices you see in a day on social networking platforms that you use regularly, and note the context of each one.

REFLECT: Write or record a reflection about when comma splices seem appropriate and when they are distracting.

46a Identifying comma splices and fused sentences

A comma splice results from placing only a comma between two independent clauses, as in this tweet:

One thing is certain, girls everywhere need education.

A related construction is a fused, or run-on, sentence, which results from joining two independent clauses with no punctuation or connecting word between them. As a fused sentence, the tweet above would read One thing is certain girls everywhere need education.

Using comma splices is increasingly common in writing that aims for a casual, informal feel, but comma splices and fused sentences in academic writing are likely to draw an instructor’s criticism. If you use comma splices and fused sentences in formal writing, be sure your audience can tell that you are doing so for a special effect.
Identifying comma splices and fused sentences

Editing for comma splices and fused sentences

If you find no punctuation between two of your independent clauses—groups of words that can stand alone as sentences—you have identified a fused sentence. If you find two such clauses joined only by a comma, you have identified a comma splice. Revise comma splices and fused sentences with one of these methods.

1. Separate the clauses into two sentences. (46b)

   Education is an elusive idea, it means different things to different people.

2. Link the clauses with a comma and a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, so, or yet). (46c)

   Education is an elusive idea, it means different things to different people.

3. Link the clauses with a semicolon. (46d)

   Education is an elusive idea; it means different things to different people.

   If the clauses are linked with only a comma and a conjunctive adverb—a word like however, then, therefore—add a semicolon.

   Education is an elusive idea, it means different things to different people.

4. Recast the two clauses as one independent clause. (46e)

   An elusive idea, education

   Education is an elusive idea, it means different things to different people.

5. Recast one independent clause as a dependent clause. (46f)

   Education is an elusive idea, because it means different things to different people.

6. In informal writing, link the clauses with a dash. (46g)

   Education is an elusive idea—it means different things to different people.
46b  Separating the clauses into two sentences

The simplest way to revise comma splices or fused sentences is to separate them into two sentences.

**COMMA SPLICE**

My mother spends long hours every spring tilling the soil and moving manure. **This part of gardening is nauseating.**

**FUSED SENTENCE**

My mother spends long hours every spring tilling the soil and moving manure. **This part of gardening is nauseating.**

If the two clauses are very short, making them two sentences may sound abrupt and terse, so some other method of revision is probably preferable.

46c  Linking the clauses with a comma and a coordinating conjunction

If the ideas in the two clauses are closely related and equally important, you can join them with a comma and a coordinating conjunction: *and, but, or, nor, for, so,* or *yet.* (See Chapter 54.) The conjunction helps indicate what kind of link exists between the two clauses. For instance, *but* and *yet* signal opposition or contrast; *for* and *so* signal cause-effect relationships.

**COMMA SPLICE**

I got up feeling bad, I took some aspirin. **so**

**FUSED SENTENCE**

I should pay my tuition, I need a new car. **but**

46d  Linking the clauses with a semicolon

If the ideas in the two clauses are closely related and you want to give them equal emphasis, you can link them with a semicolon.

**COMMA SPLICE**

This photograph is not at all realistic; it uses dreamlike images to convey its message.

**FUSED SENTENCE**

The practice of journalism is changing dramatically; advances in technology have sped up news cycles.
Be careful when you link clauses with either a conjunctive adverb or a transitional phrase. Precede such words and phrases with a semicolon (see Chapter 55), with a period, or with a comma combined with a coordinating conjunction (36g).

**COMMA SPLICE**

Many developing countries have very high birthrates; therefore, most of their citizens are young.

**FUSED SENTENCE**

Many developing countries have very high birthrates, therefore, most of their citizens are young.

**FUSED SENTENCE**

Many developing countries have very high birthrates, and therefore, most of their citizens are young.

**SOME CONJUNCTIVE ADVERBS AND TRANSITIONAL PHRASES**

- also
- in contrast
- next
- anyway
- indeed
- now
- besides
- in fact
- otherwise
- certainly
- instead
- similarly
- finally
- likewise
- still
- furthermore
- meanwhile
- then
- however
- moreover
- therefore
- in addition
- namely
- thus
- incidentally
- nevertheless
- undoubtedly

**SENTENCE LENGTH**

In U.S. academic contexts, readers sometimes find a series of short sentences “choppy” and undesirable. If you want to connect two independent clauses into one sentence, be sure to join them with a comma followed by a coordinating conjunction (and, but, for, so, nor, or, or yet) or with a semicolon. Doing so will help you avoid a comma splice, which is often considered an error in formal writing. Another useful tip for writing in American English is to avoid writing several very long sentences in a row. If you find this pattern in your writing, try breaking it up by including a shorter sentence occasionally. See the tips in Chapter 52 for altering the sentence lengths and patterns in your writing.
46e Recasting two clauses as one independent clause

Sometimes you can reduce two spliced or fused clauses to a single independent clause that is more direct and concise.

A large part of my mail is advertisements, most of the rest is bills.

46f Recasting one independent clause as a dependent clause

When one independent clause is more important than the other, try converting the less important one to a dependent clause.

The arts and crafts movement called for handmade objects, it reacted against mass production.

In the revision, the writer chooses to emphasize the first clause, the one describing what the movement advocated, and to make the second clause, the one describing what it reacted against, into a dependent clause.

Although Zora Neale Hurston is regarded as one of America’s major novelists, she died in obscurity.

In the revision, the writer chooses to emphasize the second clause and to make the first one into a dependent clause by adding the subordinating conjunction although (36g).

46g Linking two independent clauses with a dash

In informal writing, you can use a dash to join two independent clauses, especially when the second clause elaborates on the first.

Exercise has become too much like work—it’s a bad trend.
ExERCisE 46.1

Using two of the methods in this chapter, revise each item to correct its comma splice or fused sentence. Use each of the methods at least once. Example:

I had misgivings about the marriage, I did not attend the ceremony.
Because
I had misgivings about the marriage, I did not attend the ceremony.

1. Many motorists are unaware of the dangers of texting while driving, lawmakers have taken the matter into their own hands.
2. The tallest human on record was Robert Wadlow he reached an amazing height of eight feet, eleven inches.
3. Some employers provide on-site care for the children of their employees, others reimburse workers for day-care costs.
4. The number of vaccine manufacturers has plummeted the industry has been hit with a flood of lawsuits.
5. Most crustaceans live in the ocean, some also live on land or in freshwater habitats.
6. She inherited some tribal customs from her grandmother, she knows the sewing technique called Seminole patchwork.
7. Don’t throw your soda cans in the trash recycle them.
8. My West Indian neighbor has lived in New England for years, nevertheless, she always feels betrayed by winter.
9. The Hope diamond in the Smithsonian Institution is impressive in fact, it looks even larger in person than online.
10. You signed up for the course now you’ll have to do the work.

ExERCisE 46.2

Revise the following paragraph, eliminating all comma splices by using a period or a semicolon. Then revise the paragraph again, this time using any of the other methods in this chapter. Comment on the two revisions. What differences in rhythm do you detect? Which version do you prefer, and why?

We may disagree on the causes of global warming, however, we cannot ignore that it is happening. Of course we still experience cold winters, on the other hand, average global temperatures have risen drastically for the last three decades. Polar ice caps are melting, as a result, sea levels are rising. Scientists predict more extreme weather in the coming decades, droughts will probably be more common, in addition, flooding and tropical storm activity may increase. Some experts fear that rising temperatures may cause large amounts of methane
gases to be released, this could be disastrous for our atmosphere. Climate change may have human causes, it might be a natural occurrence, nevertheless, we must find ways to save our planet.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT COMMA SPLICES AND FUSED SENTENCES

Reading with an eye for special effects

Roger Angell is known as a careful and correct stylist, yet he often deviates from the “correct” to create special effects, as in this passage about pitcher David Cone:

And then he won. Next time out, on August 10th, handed a seven-run lead against the A’s, he gave up two runs over six innings, with eight strike-outs. He had tempo, he had poise.

—ROGER ANGELL, “Before the Fall”

Angell uses a comma splice in the last sentence to emphasize parallel ideas; any conjunction, even and, would change the causal relationship he wishes to show. Because the splice is unexpected, it attracts just the attention that Angell wants for his statement.

Look through some stories or essays to find comma splices and fused sentences. Copy down one or two and enough of the surrounding text to show context, and comment in writing on the effects they create.

Thinking about any comma splices and fused sentences in your own writing

Go through some essays you have written, checking for comma splices and fused sentences. Revise any you find, using one of the methods in this chapter. Comment on your chosen methods.
CHAPTER 47
Fragments

SENTENCE FRAGMENTS are often used to make writing sound conversational, as in this Facebook status update:

Realizing that there are no edible bagels in this part of Oregon. Sigh.

Fragments — groups of words that are punctuated as sentences but are not sentences — are often seen in intentionally informal writing and in public writing, such as advertising, that aims to attract attention or give a phrase special emphasis. Think carefully before using fragments in academic or professional writing, where some readers might regard them as errors.

CONNECT: When might you choose to use a fragment for a particular effect? 2a, 47a

CREATE: Keep a log of the fragments you see in professional writing (such as advertising) in a single day. Note the context of each one.

REFLECT: Write or record a reflection about the effect of fragments in professional writing.

47a Identifying fragments

A group of words must meet the following three criteria to form a complete sentence. If it does not meet all three, it is considered a fragment.

1. A sentence must have a subject. (37b)

2. A sentence must have a verb, not just a verbal. A verbal (such as the particle singing) needs a helping verb in order to function as a sentence’s verb.

   VERBAL She singing.
   VERB She is singing.

3. Unless it is a question, a sentence must have at least one clause that does not begin with a subordinating conjunction such as because, if, that, or when. See 36g for a list of common subordinating conjunctions.
Revising phrase fragments

Phrases are groups of words that lack a subject, a verb, or both (37d). When phrases are punctuated like sentences, they become fragments. To revise such a fragment, either attach it to an independent clause or make it a separate sentence.

- **NBC is broadcasting the debates** with discussions afterward.
  The word group with discussions afterward is a prepositional phrase, not a sentence. The editing combines the phrase with an independent clause.

- **The town’s growth is controlled by zoning laws** A strict set of regulations for builders and corporations.
  A strict set of regulations for builders and corporations is an appositive phrase renaming the noun zoning laws. The editing attaches the fragment to the sentence containing that noun.

- **Kamika stayed out of school for three months after Linda was born.**
  To recuperate and to take care of the baby.
  To recuperate and to take care of the baby includes verbals, not verbs. The revision — adding a subject (she) and a verb (wanted) — turns the fragment into a separate sentence.

- **Avoiding fragments beginning with transitions**
  If you introduce an example or explanation with a transition, such as one of the following, be certain you write a sentence, not a fragment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>again</th>
<th>but</th>
<th>instead</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>also</td>
<td>finally</td>
<td>like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and</td>
<td>for example</td>
<td>or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as a result</td>
<td>for instance</td>
<td>such as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>besides</td>
<td>however</td>
<td>that is</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Barbara Ehrenreich has written on many subjects** such as underemployment and positive psychology.
  In the original, the second word group is a phrase, not a sentence. The editing combines it with an independent clause.
47c  Revising compound-predicate fragments

A compound predicate consists of two or more verbs, along with their modifiers and objects, that share the same subject. Fragments occur when one part of a compound predicate lacks a subject but is punctuated as a separate sentence. These fragments usually begin with *and*, *but*, or *or*. You can revise them by attaching them to the independent clause that contains the rest of the predicate.

They sold their house and moved into an apartment.

**EXERCISE 47.1**

Revise each of the following items to eliminate any sentence fragments, either by combining fragments with independent clauses or by rewriting them as separate sentences. Example:

**Zoe looked close to tears. Standing with her head bowed.**

1. Long stretches of white beaches and shady palm trees. Give tourists the impression of an island paradise.
2. Forgetting to study for an exam. That is what many college students are afraid of.
3. Much of New Orleans is below sea level. Making the city susceptible to flooding.
4. Uncle Ron forgot to bring his clarinet to the party. Fortunately for us.
5. Oscar night is an occasion for celebrating the film industry. And criticizing the fashion industry.
7. In the late 1940s, women began hosting Tupperware parties. Casual gatherings in which the hosts act as salespersons.
8. Attempting to lose ten pounds in less than a week. I ate only cottage cheese and grapefruit.
9. Our parents did not realize that we were hoarding our candy. Under our beds.
10. Thomas Edison was famous for his inventions. For example, the phonograph and the first practical lightbulb.
47d Revising dependent-clause fragments

Dependent clauses contain both a subject and a verb, but they cannot stand alone as sentences because they depend on an independent clause to complete their meaning. Dependent clauses usually begin with words such as after, because, before, if, since, though, unless, until, when, where, while, who, which, and that (36g and 37e). You can usually combine dependent-clause fragments with a nearby independent clause.

- The team had a dismal record, which spurred the owner to fire the manager.

If you cannot smoothly attach a dependent clause to a nearby independent clause, try deleting the opening subordinating word and turning the dependent clause into a sentence.

- The majority of injuries in automobile accidents occur in two ways.

  When an occupant either is hurt by something inside the car or is thrown from the car.

**EXERCISE 47.2**

Identify all the sentence fragments in the following items, and explain why each is grammatically incomplete. Then revise each one in at least two ways. Example:

**Controlling my temper. That has been one of my goals this year.**

**One of my goals this year has been controlling**

**Controlling my temper. That has been one of my goals this year.**

1. As soon as the seventy-five-year-old cellist walked onstage. The audience burst into applause.
2. The patient has only one intention. To smoke behind the doctor’s back.
3. Some reality shows feature people working in dangerous situations. Such as fishing for Alaskan king crab or logging in swamps.
4. After writing and rewriting for almost three years. She finally felt that her novel was complete.
5. In the wake of the earthquake. Relief workers tried to provide food and shelter to victims.
6. Forster stopped writing novels after *A Passage to India*. Which is one of the greatest novels of the twentieth century.
7. Because only two students signed up. The class was canceled this semester.
8. I started running in April. And ran my first marathon in September.
9. We sat stunned as she delivered her monologue. A ten-minute speech about everything we had done to annoy her.
10. All primates have opposable thumbs. Which sets them apart from other mammals.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT FRAGMENTS

Reading with an eye for fragments
Identify the fragments in the following passage. What effect does the writer achieve by using fragments rather than complete sentences?

On Sundays, for religion, we went up on the hill. Skipping along the hexagon-shaped tile in Colonial Park. Darting up the steps to Edgecomb Avenue. Stopping in the candy store on St. Nicholas to load up. Leaning forward for leverage to finish the climb up to the church. I was always impressed by this particular house of the Lord. —KEITH GILYARD, Voices of the Self

Thinking about any fragments in your own writing
Read through some essays you have written. Using the guidelines in 47a, see whether you find any sentence fragments. If so, do you recognize any patterns? Do you write fragments when you're attempting to add emphasis? Are they all dependent clauses? phrases? Note any patterns you discover, and make a point of routinely checking your writing for fragments. Finally, revise any fragments to form complete sentences.