Sentence Fragments, Comma Splices, and Run-Ons

Sentence fragments, comma splices, and run-on sentences are three common errors in sentence building. You probably already know they *are* wrong when you read them, but you might not know what to call them or how to explain *why* they are wrong, or how to correct them. Read on for some helpful tips.

Sentence Fragments

A sentence must:

- **contain both a subject and a verb**
- **express a complete thought.**

For example, in this sentence,

Pranav teaches classics at Queen's

has a subject (*Pranav*) and a verb (*teaches*), and it expresses a complete thought.

Sentence fragments are sentences that are **missing** at least one of these elements. For example:

Pranav enjoyed his time at Queen's. Teaching classics.

The second sentence, "*Teaching classics,*" does not have a subject and verb, nor does it express a complete thought on its own.

Pranav enjoyed his time at Queen's. When he taught classics*.*

The second sentence, above, now has a subject and verb, but it's incomplete; the reader wonders, "What **about** when he taught classics?"

A sentence fragment occurs most often when **a dependent clause** is incorrectly used as a sentence on its own.

Incorrect: Although the theory is broadly applied.

The writer can correct this fault by adding an **independent clause** to the sentence.

Correct: Although the theory is broadly applied, some scholars point out that it does not consider the experiences of working-class women in early 20thc Britain.

Comma Splices

A comma splice occurs when **two independent clauses** **are separated by a comma**. For example:

The war had no single cause, there were many contributing factors.

This error can be corrected in several different ways:

- insert a **period** between the two independent clauses, after the word *cause,* to make them separate sentences

- insert one of the **coordinating conjunctions** (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*) between the two independent clauses, after the word *cause*

- place a **dependent conjunction** (*although, since, if, whether, because*) before one of the independent clauses to turn it into a dependent clause; keep the comma between the clauses

- place a **semicolon** between the two independent clauses

- completely reword the sentence (e.g., *A number of factors, not merely one, caused the war*).

A word of caution: it's common for writers to commit a **comma splice** error by joining two main clauses with a conjunctive adverb (*however, therefore, thus*, etc.) and only a comma.

The proposed policies are not necessarily right, however, they have survived much careful scrutiny.

The however in the sentence above doesn't work as a coordinating conjunction or as a dependent conjunction; it can't make the second independent clause a dependent clause. A period or a semi-colon before the however will correct the problem:

The proposed policies are not necessarily right; however, they have survived much careful scrutiny.

Run-On Sentences

Run-on sentences (or fused sentences) are similar to comma splices, in that **two independent clauses** are forced together into a single "sentence," but even more recklessly, with **no punctuation at all** between them. Once you've untangled the mess and identified which words go in which independent clause, then it's a relatively simple matter to correct it, using the same strategies as you would for a comma splice (see above). For example:

There are various types of feminism however they share some common features.

The above sentence actually contains two smaller ones (you could put a period after "feminism"), but they have been stuck together, creating a run-on.

As with the comma splice, you have several options for correcting this sentence:

- put a period before "however" and a comma after it

- put a semicolon before "however" and a comma after it

- replace *however* with *yet* or *but*, as coordinating conjunctions, and add a comma in front of *yet* or *but*

- rewording one clause to make it **dependent** (e.g., *Although there are various types of feminism, they share some common features*).