

Sentence Fragments and Run-ons

If you tend to write sentence fragments and run-ons, but aren't sure how to correct them, this handout is for you. Much of the information below is adapted from *A Pocket Style Manual* by Diana Hacker (4th ed., Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2004).

Sentence fragments

Sentences consist of at least one complete independent clause, which means they include, minimally, a subject and a verb.¹ Sentence fragments typically lack a subject, or a verb, or have both but begin with a subordinating word. Often, fragments can be comfortably absorbed into adjoining sentences.

Original: *Julian enjoys standing on coffee tables. And tall chairs.*

Revised: *Julian enjoys standing on coffee tables and tall chairs.*

Original: *Barthes claims that some composers' works are better played than listened to. Schumann's, for example.*

Revised: *Barthes claims that some composers' works—Schumann's, for example—are better played than listened to.*

Original: *Data indicate that moose populations have declined most significantly in three states. Alaska, Washington, and Montana.*

Revised: *Data indicate that moose populations have declined most significantly in three states: Alaska, Washington, and Montana.*

Original: *Carbon dioxide emissions are the leading cause of global warming. So that our government must invest more money in the development of hybrid vehicles.*

Revised: *Carbon dioxide emissions are the leading cause of global warming. Thus, our government must invest more money in the development of hybrid vehicles.*

While writers occasionally use sentence fragments to add emphasis, some readers consider fragments too informal for academic writing. The following excerpt incorporates sentence fragments to generate a conversational tone:

Yo! Hey, you, with your hands on this book. Pleased to meet you. You made a good choice with this book here. (Jonathan Mooney and David Cole, *Learning Outside the Lines*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000, p. 15.)

¹ There are some exceptions, such as interrogative sentences (e.g. "Why?" and "To be or not to be?"), imperative sentences (e.g. "Go away!"), and declarative sentences (e.g. "Oops.")

Run-on sentences

Like sentence fragments, run-on sentences reflect problems with independent clauses. In run-on sentences, two or more independent clauses are improperly joined. Typically, the clauses are either fused together without a coordinating conjunction (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, or so*, a list known by the acronym FANBOYS) or are connected with a comma splice.

Fused: *I chased the purse-snatcher he got away.*

Comma splice: *I chased the purse-snatcher, he got away.*

Revised: *I chased the purse-snatcher, but he got away.*

Don't confuse FANBOYS with the conjunctive adverbs *however, nevertheless, therefore*, etc. Adverbs don't join independent clauses into one sentence. When they arise in the middle of a sentence, conjunctive adverbs need to be preceded by a semicolon and are usually followed by a comma.

Comma splice: *I chased the purse-snatcher, however I lost him.*

Comma splice: *I chased the purse-snatcher, however, I lost him.*

Revised: *I chased the purse-snatcher; however, I lost him.*

Finally, readers may label as "run-ons" sentences that just go on too long. Try reading your sentence out loud; if you have to pause to inhale too often, your sentence might benefit from being separated into two or more sentences.

Original: *Of the areas of science important to our future, few are more promising than genetic engineering, which is a new way of manipulating the elemental structural units of life itself, which are the genes and chromosomes that tell our cells how to reproduce to become the parts that constitute our bodies.*

Revised: *Many areas of science are important to our future, but few are more promising than genetic engineering. It offers a new way of manipulating the elemental structural units of life itself, the genes and chromosomes that tell our cells how to reproduce to become the parts constituting our bodies.*

The revision above breaks the original sentence into two separate sentences. What else makes the revision clearer than the original?

Useful links

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/fragments.html>

This site from the UNC Writing Center explains the nature of sentence fragments and run-on sentences, what causes them, and how you can avoid them in your writing. Although intended primarily for native speakers of English, the page also includes links for non-native speakers.