

Run-on Sentences, Comma Splices, and Sentence Fragments

Before we can talk about sentences that *don't* work, we need to identify the qualities of sentences that *do* work. Sentences must meet the following criteria:

1. They must contain a **subject** (whom or what the sentence is about).
2. They must contain a **predicate** (a **verb** – can be **action** (ran) or **state of being** (am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been)).
3. They must **express a complete thought**.

A run-on sentence is when **two complete sentences are incorrectly joined** without “a word to connect them or a punctuation mark to separate them.” (www.m-w.com). Run-ons will have two main subjects and two main predicates (or verbs), and they will express two complete thoughts that SHOULD be standing on their own.

Examples of run-on sentences:

- We went to the store my mom bought us some awesome stuff.
- We had a lot of fun on our vacation I was really sad when we had to come home.
- Our dog Scooter is a real goofball he loves to sit in cardboard boxes.
- The team played great last night in the championship game it was a close contest.
- The lettuce in the store looked horrible it was brown and slimy to the touch.

There are three ways to correct run-on sentences:

1. ***Put a period at the end of the first sentence. Add a capital to the beginning of the next sentence.***
 - a. We went to the store. **M**y mom bought us some awesome stuff.
 - b. We had a lot of fun on our vacation. **I** was really sad when we had to come home.
 - c. Our dog Scooter is a real goofball. **H**e loves to sit in cardboard boxes.
 - d. The team played great last night in the championship game. **I**t was a close contest.
 - e. The lettuce in the store looked horrible! **I**t was brown and slimy to the touch.
2. ***Put a semicolon (;) at the end of the first sentence. You do NOT begin the second sentence with a capital when you use a semicolon. The topics of the two sentences must be closely related.***
 - a. We went to the store; **m**y mom bought us some awesome stuff.
 - b. We had a lot of fun on our vacation; **I** was really sad when we had to come home.
 - c. Our dog Scooter is a real goofball; **h**e loves to sit in cardboard boxes.
 - d. The team played great last night in the championship game; **i**t was a close contest.
 - e. The lettuce in the store looked horrible; **i**t was brown and slimy to the touch.
3. ***Use a comma and a conjunction (and, but, or) to join the two sentences. Use this technique when you are SURE that there is a complete sentence on BOTH sides of the comma and conjunction.***
 - a. We went to the store, **and** my mom bought us some awesome stuff.
 - b. We had a lot of fun on our vacation, **but** I was really sad when we had to come home.
 - c. Our dog Scooter is a real goofball, **and** he loves to sit in cardboard boxes.

- d. The team played great last night in the championship game, **and** it was a close contest.
- e. The lettuce in the store looked horrible, **and** it was brown and slimy to the touch.
4. **Watch for this comma/conjunction imposter – THE COMPOUND PREDICATE!** One of THE most common errors in 8th-grade writing is placing a comma before any and all conjunctions, regardless of what’s on either side of it. You only use a comma/conjunction structure when there is a complete sentence on either side of the comma/conjunction.
- a. We went to the store, **and** my mom bought us some awesome stuff. (Correct!)
- b. We went to the store, **and** bought some awesome stuff. (**NO!** Only 1 subject!)
- c. We had a lot of fun on our vacation, **and** we went on many day trips. (Correct!)
- d. We had a lot of fun on our vacation, **and** went on many day trips. (**NO!** Only 1 subject!)
- e. The high school soccer team scored many goals, and they earned a trip to the state finals.
Correct!
- f. The high school soccer team scored many goals, and earned a trip to the state finals.
(**NO!** Only 1 subject!)
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A comma splice is when two sentences are incorrectly joined using only a comma.

(<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/2/1/34/>) **Comma splices are fixed in exactly the same ways that run-ons are.**

Examples of comma splices:

- We went to the store, my mom bought us some awesome stuff.
 - We had a lot of fun on our vacation, I was really sad when we had to come home.
 - Our dog Scooter is a real goofball, he loves to sit in cardboard boxes.
 - The team played great last night in the championship game, it was a close contest.
 - The lettuce in the store looked horrible, it was brown and slimy to the touch.
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A **sentence fragment** is a group of words that lacks a subject, a verb, or it does not express a complete thought.

To identify fragments in your writing, read a sentence aloud. Does it sound complete? If you walked up to a stranger and said it to him, would it sound like a complete thought to him, or would he be waiting expectantly for you to finish your thought? Even if your sentence sounds okay to you, look at it again to make sure you can identify the subject (who or what did the action) and the verb (what the subject did). Make sure the passage expresses a complete thought.

Missing subjects

Some fragments are missing subjects. Often the subject appears nearby, perhaps in the preceding sentence; however, each sentence must have a subject of its own. The following fragment lacks a subject:

Fragment - *Was running late that day.*

Who was running late? The instructor? The train? The simplest way to correct this fragment is to add a subject:

I was running late that day.

Missing verbs

Some fragments are missing a verb or an essential part of a verb. Any phrase, no matter how long, is a fragment if the verb is missing.

Some verbs require “helping verbs” in order to be complete. Words ending in -ing, for example, must include helpers such as am, is, are, was, were, be, being, or been to be complete verb phrases; without these helpers, they are not verbs. The fragment below contains an incomplete verb:

Fragment - *The birch trees with their rattling yellow leaves.*

This *seems* like a sentence because there appears to be a subject (trees) and a verb (rattling), but look closer. The trees are not the thing rattling – it’s their yellow leaves. The prepositional phrase *with their rattling yellow leaves* is a passage that acts like an adjective to describe *which trees* we’re talking about. There is no main verb here. What did the birch trees with their rattling leaves *do*?

The birch trees with their rattling yellow leaves swayed in the wind.

Fragment – *The birds soaring above the castle’s turrets.*

Same issue as before. *Soaring* is not the main verb here. It’s part of the -ing participial phrase that describes (adjective) which birds they are...the ones soaring above the castle’s turrets. We need a verb. We need to give the birds something to do.

The birds soaring above the castle’s turrets drifted on warm wind currents.

He’s another one:

The dog sleeping in front of the fireplace.

It can be fixed two ways:

1. Add a helping verb.
 - a. *The dog **was** sleeping in front of the fireplace.*

OR

2. Add another verb to complete the idea.
 - a. *The dog sleeping in front of the fireplace **snored loudly.***

Phrases which include words ending in *-ing* often appear as fragments:

Fragment - *Biking and swimming after work on Thursday.*

This phrase does not express a complete thought so it is a fragment. What about biking and swimming? Who is biking and swimming? Are you proposing that we all go biking and swimming? Add both a subject and a verb to correct this (again, not the only solution):

Mitchell went biking and swimming after work on Thursday.

Unfinished thoughts

A very common type of fragment is the unfinished thought fragment. While other kinds of fragments require you to add something - a subject, or a verb, or both - you can often fix unfinished thought fragments simply by joining them to a preceding or following sentence. The following example, while it contains a subject and a verb, fails to complete the thought:

Fragment - *Because tuition increased again this semester.*

The word to blame for making this thought incomplete is **because**. If you find a fragment of this kind, see if the sentence before or the sentence after it would complete it:

Because tuition increased again this semester, Kim got a second job as a Student Assistant.

or

Kim must take fewer units because tuition increased again this semester.

If the preceding or following sentence does not complete the unfinished thought, add the missing information to the fragment to make it complete.

There are many words that, by their mere presence, make a clause incomplete. For example, the words ***if, as, when, since, while, unless, although*** will create a phrase that requires a comma ***if these words appear at the beginning of a sentence!***

I'll say that again because it's so important: If the phrase that begins with these words is at the beginning of the sentence, they will ***almost always*** be attached to a complete sentence with a comma.

If the phrase that begins with these words is in the middle of a sentence, it will ***almost never*** be attached with a comma.

Unfinished thought fragments and their solutions:

1. **If it rains.**

- If it rains**, we will not go to Cedar Point. (phrase at beginning = comma)
- We will not go to Cedar Point **if it rains**. (phrase in middle = no comma)

2. **As Thursday drew to a close.**
 - a. As Thursday drew to a close, students walked to their busses.
 - b. Students walked to their busses as Thursday drew to a close.
3. **When my sister came home from college.**
 - a. When my sister came home from college, our family celebrated.
 - b. Our family celebrated when my sister came home from college.
4. **Since winter began.**
 - a. Since winter began, the days have been getting shorter and shorter.
 - b. The days have been getting shorter and shorter since winter began.
5. **While I have your attention.**
 - a. While I have your attention, I'd like to speak to you for a moment.
 - b. I'd like to speak to you for a moment while I have your attention.
6. **Unless the stock market rallies.**
 - a. Unless the stock market rallies, people will lose a lot of money.
 - b. People will lose a lot of money unless the stock market rallies.
7. **Although Mildred had the best of intentions.**
 - a. Although Mildred had the best of intentions, the surprise party was a flop.
 - b. The surprise party was a flop although Mildred had the best of intentions.