

The Writing Center at Illinois Wesleyan Presents
Sentence Structure Problems



This group of errors is one of the most widespread among student writers, and it's a problem not only because it's incorrect but also because it muddies meaning. If prose doesn't have coherent ideas in coherent sentences, the flow of thought breaks down.

Usually we identify three areas of sentence boundary problems:

- **Fragments:** lack subjects (main nouns) or predicates (main verbs), or may be a dependent clause which has not been joined to an independent clause.
- **Comma splices:** independent clauses joined with a comma
- **Fused sentences:** independent clauses joined with no punctuation

FRAGMENTS—when checking for fragments, apply these three tests:

1. Look for a **verb** [action word]. Every sentence must have a main verb. If there isn't a verb, it's a fragment.
2. Look for a **subject** [noun: person, place, thing, or idea]. Every sentence must have a main subject. If there isn't a subject, it's a fragment.
3. Look for **subordinating conjunctions** [when, while, because, etc.] or **relative pronouns** [who, which, that]. Subordinating conjunctions are used to construct *dependent* adverbial clauses; relative pronouns are used to construct *dependent* adjectival clauses. If you suspect a passage is a fragment, the presence of these words will likely prove it is.

How to fix fragments:

If the fragment is a dependent clause:

Convert the dependent clause to an independent clause by eliminating subordinating conjunctions or by substituting the antecedent or personal pronoun for the relative pronoun.

Examples:

1. Even though the president attended the meeting.

Revised: ~~Even though~~ The president attended the meeting.

2. While Americans keep recycling the same old clichés.

Revised: ~~While~~ Americans keep recycling the same old clichés.

3. Many students, who might read more often.

Revised: Many students ~~who~~ might read more often.

Revised: ~~Many students~~ They ~~who~~ might read more often.

If the fragment is a noun phrase (has no main verb) or a **verbal phrase** (verbs and associated words not functioning as a main verb):

Revising verbal phrases

Restore the subject, or join the phrase to a complete independent clause.

Example:

- Crossing out the word *very*.

Revised: Bob Smith ~~crossing~~ crossed out the word *very*.

Revised: Crossing out the word *very*, Bob Smith edited the magazine article rigorously.

Revising Infinitive phrases functioning as nouns

Rewrite as an independent clause by linking it to a subject and predicate

Example:

- To delete the word *very*.

Revised: Johnson prefers to delete the word *very* when copyediting.

Revising prepositional phrases functioning as modifiers

Join the prepositional phrase to an independent clause, usually the sentence before or after.

Example:

- With its emphasis on informal communication.

Revised: With its emphasis on informal communication, email is today's communication media of choice.

Revising absolute phrases modifying an entire sentence

Rewrite the phrase as a complete sentence, or join it as a modifier to an independent clause.

Example:

- The need for unhindered movement being a defining quality of the American character.

Revised: The need for unhindered movement ~~being~~ is a defining quality of the American character.

Revised: Automobile culture first arose in the U.S., the need for unhindered movement being a defining quality of the American character.

Revising appositive phrases

Rewrite as a complete sentence or insert into another independent clause, modifying the proper noun.

Example:

- A tendency to drive first and think about the environment later.

Revised: Americans have a tendency to drive first and think about the environment later.

Revised: Jon Adams, DOT director, says that Americans suffer from "auto-egotism," a tendency to drive first and think about the environment later.

Revising separated compound predicates.

Compound predicates are two main verbs (with connected words) linked with a coordinating conjunction like *and* or *but*. When one half of this construction is separated with a period, it becomes a fragment. To correct it, either give the fragment its own subject, or rejoin the two halves.

Example:

- The process of maturation is lifelong. But is most critical during adolescence.

Revised: The process of maturation is lifelong. But this process is most critical during adolescence.

Revised: The process of maturation is lifelong but is most critical during adolescence.

COMMA SPLICES & FUSED SENTENCES

Comma splices are simply joining two independent clauses with commas; **fused sentences** do the same thing without punctuation.

How to identify comma splices and fused sentences:

1. Look for sentences which explain, expand an idea, or link an example to an idea. Often these are fused.
2. Using pronouns like he, she, they, it, this, or that in the same sentence as the antecedent usually signals a fused sentence or comma splice.
3. Look for conjunctive adverbs (however, furthermore, thus, therefore, etc.) and transitional expressions (for example, on the other hand) often signal fused sentences or comma splices

Strategies for fixing comma splices and fused sentences:

1. Link by combining sentences

Example: Winston Churchill became a leader he served his country well in WWI he was a leader of distinction.

Revised: Winston Churchill became a leader of distinction. He served his country well in WWI.

2. Link by adding a conjunction

Example: Winston Churchill became a leader he served his country well in WWI he was a leader of distinction.

Revised: Winston Churchill served his country well in WWI, and he became a leader of distinction.

3. Link by using a semicolon

Example: Winston Churchill became a leader he served his country well in WWI he was a leader of distinction.

Revised: Winston Churchill served his country well in WWI; he became a leader of distinction.

4. Link by using a subordinating conjunction (where, while, when, because)

Example: Winston Churchill became a leader he served his country well in WWI he was a leader of distinction.

Revised: After serving his country well in WWI, Winston Churchill became a leader of distinction.