Fragments, Comma Splices, Run-ons:
How to make them go away!

Sentence fragments, comma splices and run-on sentences are some of the most common writing errors. In order to avoid these three common problems, students need to understand the use of punctuation and the necessary structure of a sentence. Fortunately, several techniques can be used to help you 1) identify and 2) correct these errors.

**Fragments**

A fragment is an incomplete sentence. It is a group of words in between two periods that is not a complete thought with all the proper parts of a sentence. The fragment may be missing a subject, a main verb, or both a subject and a verb, or it may begin with a subordinating conjunction (i.e. whenever, since, after, as long as, even though, etc.).

- **No subject** Example: *Plays the violin.*
  This is incomplete because we don’t know WHO plays. The main verb needs a subject to do the action.

  **A Way to Correct it:** Adding a subject to the beginning of these fragments is the best way to make them complete sentences: *My sister plays the violin.*

**PRACTICE:** Write appropriate subjects at the end of the following sentences, and put an “X” at the place in each sentence where the subject belongs.

1. Spends time together walking through the garden. ____________
2. During our break from class, goes to get a snack ____________
3. When I receive the letter, send it right to you. _____________

- **No main verb** Example: *The people swimming in the pool.*
  This is a fragment because *gerunds* (verbs ending with –ing) cannot be main verbs. The group of words has a subject (“people”), but the gerund (“swimming”) is playing the role of an ADJECTIVE rather than a MAIN VERB. “Swimming in the pool” is describing the subject, but what is the ACTION (verb) of the people?

  **Ways to Correct it:**
  a) Add a helping verb before the gerund: *The people are swimming in the pool.*
  b) Keep “swimming” as an adjective and add a main verb after the phrase: *The people swimming in the pool say the water is great.*
  c) Change the *gerund* form into a *main verb*: *The people swam in the pool.*

  *** Notice that the methods above created sentences with different meanings. Use the method that will make the sentence mean what you want it to mean.

**PRACTICE:** Fix the fragments below using the three methods (a, b, c) above. Rewrite correct complete sentences in the spaces provided.

1. The doctor doing open-heart surgery. (b)

2. My cousin who lives in Maine coming all the way here to visit. (c)

3. Janice listening to the music that her boyfriend gave her for Christmas. (c)

4. People driving all over the place without direction. (a)
- **No subject and no main verb**  Example:  *In love with the idea of love.*  
  This kind of fragment is not as common as the others, but it is worth discussing.  
  In the example, you only have prepositional phrases (“in love with the idea of love”) and no subject or verb.  
  
  **A Way to Correct it:**  Add a subject and a verb, such as “He is …” or “They were …..”  
  Again, the key with these first three fragments is to make sure that the subject and main verb are clear.  

- **Begins with a Subordinating Conjunction**  Example:  *Before she went home.*  
  A subordinating conjunction is a word that begins a dependent or subordinate clause.  A clause is a group of words with a subject and main verb.  Here are some subordinating conjunctions:  
  *after, as if, if, until, whose, unless, since, whether, even though, although, in order to, rather than, because, before, while*  
  Subordinate clauses CANNOT stand on their own.  If a subordinate clause is surrounded by two periods, it is a fragment.  “Before she went home” is incomplete because it DEPENDS on a complete sentence, or independent clause.  
  This fragment is just giving us a time frame, but we need a distinct subject and verb before we get to the period!  Here is a common error in writing:  
  
  Sam looked all over for her keys. Before she went home. She ate dinner.  
  (independent clause)  
  (fragment)  
  (independent clause)  
  
  What happened before Sam went home?  Did she look for her keys or eat dinner?  
  The dependent clause, or fragment, needs to be connected to ONLY one of these clauses.  

**Ways to Correct it:**  
- Connect the subordinate clause to an independent clause, or complete sentence.  In the example above, this correction could be made by connecting the fragment to either clause:  
  
  Sam looked all over for her keys before she went home.  
  Before she went home, she ate dinner.  
  
  *Note: When the subordinate clause goes at the beginning of a sentence, it is followed by a comma.  However, no comma is needed when the subordinate clause comes at the end of the sentence.*  

- When the fragment is a subordinate clause (with a subject and a verb), it can be fixed by removing the subordinating conjunction.  Using the same example, this would be the result:  
  
  Sam looked all over for her keys. She went home. She ate dinner.  

The best time to use this method is when the fragment is VERY long.  

Example:  *Even though Shelly had finally come to the conclusion that she never should have started the relationship with Tom because of his drinking problem.  She still loved him.*  

Removing the subordinating conjunction makes the fragment a complete sentence in this case:  

Shelly had finally come to the conclusion that she never should have started the relationship with Tom because of his drinking problem.  
However, she still loved him.
PRACTICE: Underline all the fragments in the following paragraph and indicate the reason each is a fragment: no verb (V), no subject (S), no subject or verb (SV), or begins with subordinating conjunction (SC). Write a (C) after the complete sentences.

I have always thought it would be fun to learn how to square dance. (C) As long as I don’t have to go to the classes all by myself. In fact, I remember watching my grandparents square dance with their dancing club. Called themselves the Hillbilly Hoedowners. Especially in August when their season would be coming to an end. They would dance all night. I couldn’t believe how much energy those people had. The energy that the audience always loved. I think it must have been in my grandparents’ blood, and now I’m curious to know if it is also in mine.

Comma Splices

A comma splice occurs when a comma is used to separate two independent clauses.

Incorrect: My mom was upset to see my haircut, my friends loved it. John refuses to talk about the accident, he is still shaken up.

In the examples above, a comma is used to join these independent clauses. Independent clauses CANNOT be separated by only a comma.

Ways to Correct it:

- **Add a coordinating conjunction after the comma.** The seven coordinating conjunctions are *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so*. When a coordinating conjunction separates two independent clauses, a comma is used before it.
  
  **Examples:**
  
  My mom was upset to see my haircut, **but** my friends loved it.
  
  John refuses to talk about the accident, **for** he is still shaken up.

- **Replace the comma with a semicolon.** The semicolon can be used to separate independent clauses that are *closely related in meaning*. Both of our comma splices can be fixed in this way:
  
  **Examples:**
  
  My parents were upset to see my haircut; my friends loved it.
  
  John refuses to talk about the accident; he is still shaken up.

  With a semicolon, you can also use **transitions**, such as however, therefore, as a result, consequently, nevertheless, later, in addition, etc. These CANNOT be used like coordinating conjunctions.

  **Examples:**
  
  My mom was upset to see my haircut; **however**, my friends loved it.
  
  John refuses to talk about the accident; **indeed**, he is still shaken up.

- **Create two sentences.** Terminal punctuation (a period, exclamation point, or question mark) can be used to fix a comma splice. In this case, the first word of the second sentence is capitalized.

  **Example:** My mom was upset to see my haircut. My friends loved it.

- **Make one subordinate (dependent) clause.** This can be done by adding a subordinating conjunction to the beginning of one of the clauses. Also, remember to omit the comma before dependent clauses at the end of sentences.

  **Examples:**
  
  **Although** my mom was upset to see my haircut, my friends loved it. John refuses to talk about the accident **because** he is still shaken up.
- **Combine clauses into one independent clause.** This can be done when subjects or main verbs are the same in each clause.
  
  **Example:** John refuses to talk about the accident and **is** still shaken up. (combined subject)
  
  Notice that the subject “John” is connected with two verbs “refuses” and “is”--both verbs have the same subject. This is a complete sentence. In some cases, the verbs can be combined:
  
  **Comma splice:** My friend loves to eat sushi, I also love it.
  **Correct:** My friend **and I** love to eat sushi. (combined the verb)

**Run-on Sentences**

Run-on sentences are very similar to comma splices. The main difference is that, while comma splices have commas separating the independent clauses, in run-on sentences there is NO punctuation separating these clauses.

**Example:** I thought I heard an intruder I reached for my baseball bat.

Building a dock is difficult I hate to work in water.

Can you figure out where the punctuation belongs in each sentence? Once the two independent clauses are found, a run-on can be fixed in all the same ways that a comma splice can be fixed:

- **Add a comma and a coordinating conjunction.**
  
  I thought I heard an intruder, **so** I reached for my baseball bat.
  
- **Separate the clauses with a semicolon.**
  
  I thought I heard an intruder; I reached for my baseball bat.
  
- **Create two sentences.**
  
  I thought I heard an intruder. I reached for my baseball bat.
  
- **Make one subordinate (dependent) clause.**
  
  **Because** I thought I heard an intruder, I reached for my baseball bat.
  
- **Combine clauses into one.**
  
  I thought I heard an intruder and **reached** for my baseball bat.

**PRACTICE:** Re-write the 2nd example sentence (“Building a dock...”) using the five methods above.

1. ____________________________________________________

2. ____________________________________________________

3. ____________________________________________________

4. ____________________________________________________

5. ____________________________________________________
More Practice

Directions: In the spaces, indicate the occurrence of comma splices (CS), fragments (F), and run-on sentences (RO).

____ 1. No one attended classes on Monday, we were celebrating Saturday’s football victory.

____ 2. Even though every river must sometime, somewhere, empty into the sea.

____ 3. Lancelot gazed on the Lady of Shalott, then he said, “She has a lovely face.”

____ 4. John is a good-natured roommate, however, he does lose his temper once in a while.

____ 5. The pleasant part being that he never stays angry long.

____ 6. I am very happy to hear of your success no one deserved it more.

____ 7. Not realizing that the student was a budding genius.

____ 8. What has happened to this economy, many Americans want the answer to this question.

Correct the comma splices and run-on sentences in the following paragraph.

Americans use more energy per person than any other people in the world. We have only 6 percent of the world’s population, however, we use about one-third of all the energy consumed on this globe. Our total national energy cost in 1975 amounted to about $170 billion, each year our energy needs are steadily rising. Most of the energy we use in the U.S. comes from crude oil, because domestic production falls short of our needs, we have to import almost half of it. Expert estimates of our known and potential domestic reserves vary, we probably have somewhere between a 25- to 30-year supply of oil. We must, though, keep our energy-use growth to about 2 percent per year. If we continue using energy as we have become accustomed to, we could run out of domestic oil supplies in the year 2007, we may run out of natural gas even sooner. The overall energy situation in the U.S. is not rosy. Energy demands and prices keep going up, therefore, the availability and future costs of supplies remain uncertain. (1996)