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# The Comma Splice

And How to Deal with It!

# The Comma Splice

One of the most common grammatical errors is to join two or more independent clauses with a comma. This mistake is so common that it has been given a name: a comma splice, also known as a run-on sentence.

So, what is an independent clause? An independent clause is a sentence that can stand alone: it is a complete thought and has a subject and a verb.

Sarah applied for a new job, she hated working at the petrol station. ✘

I need to find my sun cream, the sun is scorching. ✘

I love to read, I only enjoy romance novels. ✘

Mum is coming for lunch, I've made her favourite soup. ✘

All of the above sentences are examples of a comma splice. Two independent clauses have been joined with a comma, and a comma is not strong enough to join them. It just doesn't have the muscles!

So, how do I fix them? A full stop, semicolon or colon can be used instead of a comma.

Sarah applied for a new job. She hated working at the petrol station. ✓

Sarah applied for a new job; she hated working at the petrol station. ✓

Sarah applied for a new job: she hated working at the petrol station. ✓

Whether to use a full stop, semicolon or colon will depend on how closely related the ideas are and the tone that you want. A full stop delivers a punchier feel, more abrupt, and creates more distance between ideas. The semicolon is useful when there is a logical relation between sentences, and the colon is often used when the second sentence explains the meaning of the first: it connects the two sentences strongly.

I need to find my sun cream: the sun is scorching. ✓

You can see from the above example that the colon does a great job of showing a close connection between the sentences: the second sentence explains the first.

There is another way to join independent clauses: co-ordinating conjunctions. These are for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so. A good way to remember them is FANBOYS. These conjunctions are used to join two or more independent clauses of equal importance.

Mum is coming for lunch, **and** I've made her favourite soup. ✓

Mum is coming for lunch, **so** I've made her favourite soup. ✓

I love to read, **but** I only enjoy romance novels. ✓

When joining two or more independent clauses with a co-ordinating conjunction, it is conventional to put a comma before the conjunction. However, for style purposes, when joining short independent clauses it is perfectly acceptable to omit the comma before the conjunction.

Mandy went home and John went to work. ✓

Mandy went home, and John went to work. ✓

## Breaking the Rules

You've probably read books by famous authors that do include comma splices, and many writers do use run-on sentences (another name for comma splices) to achieve a particular effect. Take the sentences below as an example.

He couldn't take it anymore, he had to get out, they were close, getting closer, any moment now, they'd find him.

He couldn't take it anymore, and he had to get out. They were close and getting closer and, any moment now, they'd find him.

The first example is a run-on sentence and is considered a grammatical no-no, but it has been done to create a sense of urgency and panic. It works well because it reflects how the character is feeling: his life is in danger and his thoughts are coming quickly, not slowly and well-ordered!

The second example is grammatically correct but all the tension, the excitement, the sense of impending danger, has been lost. You want your reader to be swept along with the action and feel what your character feels. His life is in danger – everything is at stake – and you want your reader's pulse to quicken!

**A professional proofreader will be aware that a delicate touch is needed when proofreading fiction, and they will need to use oodles of careful judgement!**

In summary, it is important to understand the rules of grammar so that when you break them, it is for a reason. Writing that is full of comma splices that have not been used to achieve a particular effect will likely irritate your reader. You want them absorbed in your story, not distracted by mistakes.

