

INSTITUTE WRITING PROGRAM

THE WRITING CENTER

Sentence Fragments and Run-Ons

Sentence fragments are an incomplete sentence used as a sentence. While sentences are independent clauses that express complete thoughts, fragments are either **(1)** partial clauses that lack either a subject or a verb or **(2)** dependent clauses that do not express a complete thought.

Partial clauses

*Left all the lights on in the house. >revise> **Jamie** left all the lights on in the house.*

The sentence above is a fragment lacking a subject. To complete the sentence, ask yourself who or what performs the action of the sentence and rewrite the sentence to include that actor (your subject).

*Frank and a bunch of guys he knew in high school. >revise>
Frank and a bunch of guys he knew in high school **went fishing**.*

The sentence above is a fragment that lacks a verb. To complete the sentence, ask yourself what action, event or way of being your subject performs or displays and add in the appropriate verb.

Dependent clauses constitute sentence fragments when they are not attached to an independent clause. Without an independent clause to accompany it, a dependent clause cannot express a complete thought.

When they are not attached to an independent clause. >revise>

*When they are not attached to an independent clause, **dependent clauses are not complete sentences**.*

The sentence above is a sentence fragment because it does not express a complete thought. A reader is likely to ask, “When they are not attached to an independent clause, what happens?” To complete this sentence, write an independent clause that completes the thought expressed in the dependent clause.

Common subordinating words (words that create a dependent clause) include:

although	if	when
as	since	where
because	that	whether
before	though	which
how	unless	who

While fragments can be used for stylistic effect, you should avoid fragments in most academic prose.



Run-on sentences have two or more independent clauses that are not joined together by a comma-conjunction pair, a semicolon, or a colon. To correct a run-on sentence, you should either add the appropriate connection (comma and a coordinating conjunction [*and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet*], semicolon, etc.) or split the independent clauses into two or more sentences.

I wanted to go to the movies my sister wanted to go out to dinner.

The sentence above contains two independent clauses: “I wanted to go to the movies,” and “my sister wanted to go out to dinner.” You could correct this sentence in several ways.

Comma and a coordinating conjunction:

*I wanted to go to the movies, **but** my sister wanted to go out to dinner.*

Semi-colon:

I wanted to go to the movies; my sister wanted to go out to dinner.

Split the sentence in two:

*I wanted to go to the movies. **My** sister wanted to go out to dinner.*

Each option adds a different emphasis to your ideas. When you are revising a run-on sentence, ask yourself why you initially fused the two sentences together. Often, writers fuse sentences because the ideas in the independent clauses are very closely connected. Identifying how the ideas are connected can help you decide how best to separate the clauses while still expressing the connection between your ideas.

Comma-splices are a specific type of run-on sentence that joins two independent clauses with a comma alone.

Tom ate three large pizzas in an hour, he got very queasy.

To fix a comma-splice, add the appropriate coordinating conjunction (and, or, but, etc.).

*Tom ate three large pizzas in an hour, **and** he got very queasy.*

You can also replace the comma in a comma-splice with a semi-colon.

Tom ate three large pizzas in an hour; he got very queasy.

Be careful about over-using semi-colons. For more on the appropriate use of both semi-colons and commas, consult our “Commas and Semi-colons” handout.