

Comma Splices and Fused Sentences

Comma splices and fused sentences are common punctuation pattern errors that are easily corrected. A comma splice (CS) or a fused sentence (FS) occurs when two independent clauses, or two complete sentences, are incorrectly connected.

Grammar Review

An **independent clause** is a group of words that contains a complete subject and verb and can stand alone as a sentence.

Examples: I enjoy amusement parks.
I did not have fun at Great America.

In the following **comma splice**, two independent clauses have been joined with a comma alone.

Example: I enjoy amusement parks, I did not have fun at Great America.

In the following **fused sentence**, the two independent clauses have been combined without any punctuation or conjunction between them.

Example: My mom made dinner I ate at home.

Corrected, the sample sentences follow recognizable patterns of punctuation that signal to readers clearly the beginning and ending of the clauses—the two key units of meaning in the sentence.

Corrected: I enjoy amusement parks, **but** I didn't have fun at Great America.

Corrected: My mom made dinner; I ate at home.

Since independent clauses form complete sentences, each with its own subject and verb, they must, even when they are joined to form a compound sentence, retain their function as units of meaning. That is why punctuation is so important in these sentences: the reader needs to read the words as a unit; punctuation helps them do that.

Here are several ways to re-punctuate a comma splice or fused sentence.

Use a Period between the Clauses

Comma Splice: I enjoy amusement parks, I didn't have fun at Great America.

Corrected: I enjoy amusement parks. I didn't have fun at Great America.

Fused Sentence: My mom made dinner I ate at home.

Corrected: My mom made dinner. I ate at home.

The new versions use two simple sentences (only one clause). The sentences are no longer linked for the reader.

Add a Coordinating Conjunction with a Comma between the Clauses

Another way to fix a comma splice or a fused sentence is by using a coordinating conjunction and comma. Coordinating conjunctions (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so*) along with a comma before the conjunction can be used to combine two independent clauses. Each of the coordinating conjunctions adds different meaning to your sentence—"but" adds contradiction, "so" adds a cause-and-effect relationship, and so on—so you must pick the conjunction that works best for the information in your sentence.

Comma Splice: I enjoy amusement parks, I didn't have fun at Great America.

Corrected: I enjoy amusement parks, **but** I didn't have fun at Great America.

Fused Sentence: My mom made dinner I ate at home.

Corrected: My mom made dinner, **so** I ate at home.

For a comma splice, simply add a coordinating conjunction after the already present comma. For a fused sentence, add a comma and then a coordinating conjunction after the first independent clause.

The new sentences add a clear, logical connector to the sentence, working with the comma to at once separate and link the clauses in the reader's mind.

Use a Semicolon between the Clauses

A semicolon can also be used to separate two independent clauses within one sentence. Semicolons alone provide no logical connector, so they are best used with two clauses that are obviously related.

Comma Splice: I enjoy amusement parks, I didn't have fun at Great America.

Corrected: I enjoy amusement parks; I didn't have fun at Great America.

Fused Sentence: My mom made dinner I ate at home.

Corrected: My mom made dinner; I ate at home.

In the revised version of the comma splice, the second clause offers readers a clear contrast to the first clause; the semicolon elegantly separates the clauses so the reader can immediately appreciate the contrast.

The relationship between the clauses in the fused sentence is not as clear; rather than a contrast between ideas, readers need to read a cause-effect relationship.

Here the semicolon by itself is less effective: in this example, the semicolon needs a word that signals the logic of cause and effect. Consider this version:

Corrected: My mom made dinner; **consequently**, I ate at home.

Here you see the effect of adding a **conjunctive adverb** to signal to readers the cause-effect logic. The coordinating conjunction *so*, above, did the same thing. Do you see that that version is less formal? In this case, the comma with *so* is probably the best choice of the versions we've seen.

Activity

Part I

Correct the comma splices and fused sentences below.

1. I like cats, I hate dogs.
2. I studied hard this semester I earned good grades.
3. My father is chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations, he also heads the Warrant Committee.
4. Entrepreneurship is the study of small business college students are embracing it enthusiastically.
5. Your ice cream will melt, you should eat it quickly.

Part II

Below are passages from famous novels. The punctuation has been changed, and in some cases, coordinating conjunctions have been removed. Add punctuation and/or coordinating conjunctions to fix all of the comma splices and fused sentences. Remember to pick the coordinating conjunctions and punctuation that adds the correct meaning to your sentences.

1. A Christmas frost had come at midsummer a white December storm had whirled over June, ice glazed the ripe apples drifts crushed the blowing roses.
2. There [were] things which he stretched, mainly he told the truth.
3. External heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge no warmth could warm him, no wintry weather chill him. No wind that blew was bitterer than he, no falling snow was more intent upon its purpose, no pelting rain less open to entreaty.
4. It is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth, it is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind.
5. All men live enveloped in whale-lines, all are born with halters round their necks it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever present perils of life.

Answer Key for Activity

Part I

Here are possible answers for the sentences.

1. I like cats, **but** I hate dogs.
2. I studied hard this semester; I earned good grades.
3. My father is chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations. He also heads the Warrant Committee.
4. Entrepreneurship is the study of small business, **and** college students are embracing it enthusiastically.
5. Your ice cream will melt, **so** you should eat it quickly.

Part II

Here are possible answers for the passages.

1. A Christmas frost had come at midsummer; a white December storm had whirled over June; ice glazed the ripe apples, and drifts crushed the blowing roses. (from *Jane Eyre*)
2. There [were] things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. (from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*)
3. External heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge. No warmth could warm him, and no wintry weather chill him. No wind that blew was bitterer than he; no falling snow was more intent upon its purpose; no pelting rain less open to entreaty. (from *A Christmas Carol*)
4. It is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, so I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind. (from *The Importance of Being Earnest*)
5. All men live enveloped in whale-lines; all are born with halters round their necks. It is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever present perils of life. (from *Moby Dick*)