



## Comma Splices and Run-ons: Revising and Joining Sentences Correctly

### Terms to know or review before thinking about coordination and subordination:

- 1) Clause: a group of words that includes a subject and verb
- 2) Independent clause: a group of words that has a subject and verb and can stand alone (also known as a complete sentence; a group of words that expresses a complete thought)
- 3) Dependent clause: a group of words that has a subject and verb but cannot stand alone because it also has either a subordinating conjunction or a relative pronoun attached to it
- 4) Coordination: the act of connecting two independent clauses with a comma and a coordinating conjunction (FANBOYS) in order to show a specific relationship between their respective ideas.

### There are two steps you must remember when you join two sentences:

Step One: Show *separation* between independent clauses by using proper punctuation, such as the comma, semicolon, colon, or period.

Step Two: Show the *relationship* to be understood between the independent clauses; with this step, always try to find a conjunctive word that best describes the relationship you wish to show (See “Words that Show Relationships” handout).

Example: He is afraid of spiders, *so* he ran screaming for a safe place when he saw the shadow of a little spider cast against the wall.

### Common structural errors that can occur when coordinating independent clauses:

A run-on (a.k.a. a fused sentence) occurs when a writer shows no separation between her/his independent clauses; in other words, the writer did not follow step one above. This can be tricky because sometimes a conjunctive word can appear to be enough, but it is not.

A comma splice occurs when a writer shows separation by using a comma but forgets to use one of the coordinating conjunctions (FANBOYS) to show the relationship to be understood between the independent clauses. (The writer did not follow step two above.)

### Activity: Identify the following errors. Label them as either run-on sentences or comma splices.

- 1) On the way to the museum, I stopped at Gray’s Papaya for a hot dog, then I was so full I couldn’t concentrate on the paintings. \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) It is difficult to think of a good idea so I tend to just sit and stare at the computer screen when I am writing. \_\_\_\_\_

Here are four easy ways to join your independent clauses correctly. It's a good idea to practice using all of the possibilities so that you will be able to vary your sentence types.

### 1) Comma (,) + a coordinating conjunction (FANBOYS)

These are the **coordinating conjunctions**. (The only seven words you can use to connect two independent clauses when using a comma): For And Nor But Or Yet So

**The cat jumped, and the dog barked.**

**The cat jumped, so the dog barked.**

**The cat jumped, for the dog barked.**

*Note: Don't confuse this with a compound verb. For example, "The dog ran and barked" is a simple sentence with a compound verb; it is not a compound sentence because there is only one subject "dog." It has a compound verb because the dog is doing two things: running and barking.*

### 2) Semicolon (;)

For a more formal, academic approach, use the semicolon in this way when the relationship between the ideas is implicit or understood without a conjunctive word (or words).

When you use the semicolon, you can think of it as a piece of stacked punctuation: the top half acts like a period that stops the first independent clause while the comma in the bottom half tells the reader that the second clause is related to the first. This will help us remember that we are still showing separation and relationship.

**The cat jumped; the dog barked.**

### 3) Semicolon (;) + conjunctive adverb + comma (,)

When you use a conjunctive adverb while coordinating, be sure to 1) use a semicolon before the conjunctive adverb 2) choose the conjunctive adverb showing the appropriate relationship 3) place a comma after the conjunctive adverb (if it is more than two syllables [with the exception of hence]). Here are *a few* common conjunctive adverbs: however, otherwise, in addition, furthermore, therefore, consequently, nevertheless, on the other hand, first.

Using a conjunctive adverb makes the formal connection of the semicolon's relationship explicitly understood. For a detailed list of some of these words and the relationships they show, refer to the "Words That Show Relationships" handout.

**The cat jumped; therefore, the dog barked.**

### 4) Colon (:)

The colon works kind of like an equals sign (=): the colon tells the reader that what comes after it is going to explain and/or define what came before it. [NOTE—you do not need any more than two independent clauses to show this kind of relationship.]

**The cat jumped; therefore, the dog barked: it was a busy day in the backyard.**

In the above example, the clause after the colon explains why the clause (or clauses) before the colon was necessary to understand.