



Sentence Boundaries: Run-ons, Comma Splices, and Fragments

The MOST CRUCIAL aspect of punctuating has to do with sentence boundaries—using punctuation to show where one sentence stops and the next one begins. Below are three of the most common mistakes that writers make with sentence boundaries. If you want your ideas to be read and understood, you need to learn to recognize these three kinds of errors and correct them.

Run-On Sentences (Also called Fused Sentences) run sentences together, leaving out the periods altogether. Note these three examples:

1. We got lost on the way to Pasadena we missed the parade entirely.
2. Many cultures tell the story of a Great Flood that destroyed everyone except one good couple the story of Noah and his wife is just one of the tales.
3. I've always had trouble with punctuation I find all of the rules overwhelming.

OPTIONS FOR CORRECTING RUN-ON SENTENCES INCLUDE

1. Separating the sentences with a period,
2. Separating the sentences with a semi-colon,
3. Separating the sentences with a comma and a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so),
4. Restructuring the sentences using a subordinator (such as because, after, before, after, if, since, when, while).

Note how these options work to correct the sample fused sentences:

1. Many cultures tell the story of a Great Flood that destroyed everyone except one good couple. The story of Noah and his wife is just one of these stories.
2. I've always had trouble with punctuation; I find all of the rules overwhelming.
3. We got lost on the way to Pasadena, so we missed the parade entirely.
4. Because we got lost on the way to Pasadena, we missed the parade entirely.

Comma Splices (CS) try to “splice” or join complete sentences together with commas. As you know, a comma asks your readers to pause, not stop—and we need to stop briefly at the end of one sentence before we continue on to the next. Note these three examples:

1. Johnny grew up fast, he was the eldest child in a family of 8.
2. We stood in line for hours at registration, the system really needs to be changed.
3. Working as a waitress can be awful, there is very little security.

OPTIONS FOR CORRECTING COMMA SPLICES are like those of correcting run-on sentences. Just replace the misused comma with period or semi-colon, or add a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, yet, but, or, so) or subordinator (such as because, after, before, after, if, since, when, while). Note how these corrections work:

1. Johnny grew up fast. He was the eldest child in a family of 8.
2. Working as a waitress can be awful; there is very little security.
3. Working as a waitress can be awful, for there is very little security.
4. After we stood in line for hours at registration, we were convinced that the system really needs to be changed.

Fragments (Frag) are incomplete sentences. They cannot stand on their own because they do not have a complete subject and/or verb. There are three common kinds of sentence fragments:

1. They lack a verb: Invisible Man, a powerful book written by Ralph Ellison. (To correct, add a verb—such as is.)
2. They leave out the subject: And also has a job at Intel, but it is only temporary. (To correct, add a subject—such as Lydia.)
3. Most often, fragments occur when you break up a single complete sentence with a period:
 - a. The two find a job and try to settle down. While their friend seems unable to pull himself together.
 - b. During the earthquake that hit Southern California in 1994. Many buildings and freeways were destroyed or badly damaged.
 - c. We went looking for the manager of the store. Who had promised us a full refund for our purchase. (To correct theses, replace the periods with commas.)