

“Sentence crimes”: Identifying and correcting fragments, comma splices, and run-ons

Sentence boundary errors are among the most common errors writers struggle with. They’re called “boundary errors” because they are problems with accurately punctuating sentences so that they are complete and have clear “boundaries.” **They’re such serious errors that Rita Smilkstein referred to them as *sentence crimes* (*Tools for Writing*, Orlando: Harcourt, 1998).**

There are three major sentence crimes: **fragments (frag), comma splices (CS), and run-ons (RO)** (also called “fused sentences”).

Even good writers have trouble with sentence boundaries. Sometimes they crop up when writers begin writing more complicated sentences about more complicated material—as we do in college!

First, it helps to understand what an independent clause is.

A clause is a group of words that includes a subject-verb pair and additional words or phrases that “complete” the idea. Some clauses start with a word (such as “if,” “because,” or “when”) that makes them unable to stand on their own as sentences. These are **dependent clauses**:

- If the Confederate states had seceded from the Union...
- When both agents are applied in tandem...
- Because the setting is heavily detailed...

Without this “dependent word” at the beginning (a subordinate conjunction or relative word), it is an **independent clause**:

- The Confederate states had seceded from the Union.
- Both agents are applied in tandem.
- The setting is heavily detailed.

Fragments: If a sentence does not have an independent clause, it is a fragment.

The structure looked fragile. After Jill climbed. Jack climbed as well.

How to fix a fragment:

- **Attach the dependent clause to the logical independent clause on either side:**

After Jill climbed. Jack climbed as well. → After Jill climbed, Jack climbed as well.

- **If there is no independent clause next to the fragment that can be logically connected, create one:**

After Jill climbed. → After Jill climbed, **she fell.**

- **If the fragment is a dependent clause, make it independent by removing the dependent word:**

After Jill climbed. → Jill climbed.

Comma Splices: Two independent clauses separated by only a comma is a comma splice.

Jack climbed, Jill did not.

How to fix a comma splice:

- **Add a coordinating conjunction after the comma when it makes sense to do so:** (Note: There are seven coordinating conjunctions: *and, or, but, so, for, yet, and nor.*)

Jack climbed, Jill did not. → Jack climbed, **but** Jill did not.

- **Replace the comma with end punctuation or a semi-colon:**

Jack climbed, Jill did not. → Jack climbed. Jill did not.

Jack climbed, Jill did not. → Jack climbed; Jill did not.

- **Add a dependent word to one of the independent clauses to make it a dependent clause:**

Jack climbed, Jill did not. → **While** Jack climbed, Jill did not.

Run-ons: A run-on is like a comma splice but with nothing separating the independent clauses.

Ex: Jack climbed Jill did not.

How to fix a run-on: Just as you would a comma splice:

Jack climbed Jill did not. → Jack climbed, **but** Jill did not.

Jack climbed Jill did not. → Jack climbed. Jill did not.

Jack climbed Jill did not. → Jack climbed, **though** Jill did not.

Suggested links:

[UNC Chapel Hill Writing Center, "Fragments and Runons"](#)

[University College Writing Centre, University of Toronto, "Fixing Comma Splices"](#)
