

## “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.

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**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.

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### 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.

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### 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"](#)

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