

Contents

Acknowledgements	vi	9 The topic sentence	57
Introduction	vii		
Part 1 Punctuation	1		
1 Full stop or comma? (avoiding the dreaded 'comma splice')	1		
2 The comma (,)	5		
3 The colon (:)	16		
4 The semicolon (;)	25		
5 The apostrophe (')	30		
Part 2 Sentence structure	39		
6 What makes a sentence a sentence?	39		
7 The secret of clear sentences	46		
Part 3 Paragraph structure	51		
8 How to build a paragraph	51		
		Part 4 Style	63
		10 Maintaining clarity in longer sentences	63
		11 Parallel sentence structure	74
		12 Placing key points at the end of a sentence	76
		13 Beware of overusing abstract nouns	81
		14 Can I use 'I' in my essays?	86
		Part 5 At a glance	93
		15 How to improve your writing style – a checklist	93
		16 Useful phrases for essay writing	96
		Index	99

PUNCTUATION

Full stop or comma? (avoiding the dreaded ‘comma splice’)

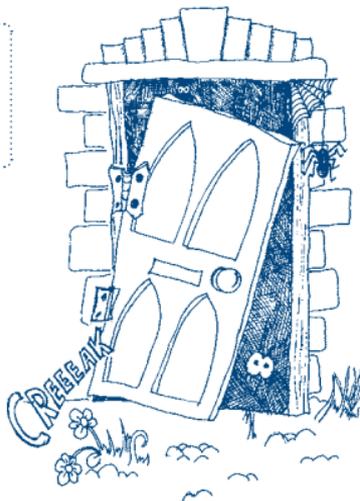


PICTURE IT

A comma between two sentences is like a rusty hinge: it just isn't strong enough to hold the sentences together.

Students often make the mistake of joining two sentences with a comma. Sometimes the misplaced comma is referred to as a ‘comma splice’, and the resulting muddle is known as a ‘run-on sentence’ – a sentence that extends or *runs on* beyond its natural life. Here's an example:

- ✗ *The structure of DNA was discovered by James Watson and Francis Crick in 1953, until then it was considered a simple molecule.*



The easiest way to solve the problem is to split the joined sentences into two, like this:

✓ *The structure of DNA was discovered by James Watson and Francis Crick in 1953. Until then it was considered a simple molecule.*

(If you're unsure about what constitutes a sentence, please see Chapter 6.)



The bottom line is that in formal and academic writing, you should never use a comma in place of a full stop.

You *will* see sentences joined by commas in novels and short stories – even in works of non-fiction – but you will be hard pushed to find them in published academic work.

Recognising the problem

Have a look at the following extracts, all taken from student essays. Which of them contain comma splices, and are therefore wrong?

- 1 *This proves that MacDonald wasn't downstairs wearing the shirt when the crime took place, forensic analysis will almost certainly support this theory.*
- 2 *Protein molecules are made up of lengths of amino acids, the shape and behaviour of a protein molecule depends on the exact sequence of those amino acids.*
- 3 *It is striking how little this consensus resonates with public opinion, typically at least 60% of respondents in opinion polls express anti-trade views.*

The answer is that all the examples are wrong, because they all contain two main clauses – clauses that could stand as sentences in their own right.

Solving the problem

- 1 As we have seen, the simplest solution is to split the two parts into separate sentences, like this:

✔ *This proves that MacDonald wasn't downstairs wearing the shirt when the crime took place. Forensic analysis will almost certainly support this theory.*

You could in fact solve all instances of 'comma splice' in this way. Splitting spliced sentences in two will always solve the problem in grammatical terms, but may not be the best decision in terms of style.

- 2 If there is a continuity of thought between the two statements, a semicolon might be a better option:

✔ *Protein molecules are made up of lengths of amino acids; the shape and behaviour of a protein molecule depends on the exact sequence of those amino acids.*



But beware ... semicolons should be used sparingly, and until you feel absolutely confident about using them, it's probably best to divide your sentences with a full stop instead.

See Chapter 4 for more information on how to use semicolons.

3 Sometimes, the second statement explains or illustrates the first. In such instances, a colon may be used:

✔ *It is striking how little this consensus resonates with public opinion: typically, at least 60% of respondents in opinion polls express anti-trade views.*

Chapter 3 explains how to use colons.

4 The final solution is to join the main clauses with a conjunction (such as ‘and’, ‘but’, ‘so’, ‘yet’, ‘for’ and so on) after a comma:

✔ *Many language theories have attempted to explain how children accomplish the incredible feat of learning a language from scratch, but it is doubtful whether any of these theories can fully account for the language acquisition capacity of the human infant.*

Proofreading for comma splices

Don’t rely on the grammar checking facility on your computer to detect this problem: such programs don’t always pick up on comma splices. Instead ...

- 1 Read through each questionable sentence and ask yourself, ‘Would the clauses on either side of the comma make sense on their own as separate sentences?’
- 2 If the answer is yes, then they shouldn’t be joined by a comma.
- 3 Use one of the four solutions outlined in this chapter.

Index

- abstract nouns, 81–5
 - proofreading for overuse of, 85
 - recognising, 81–3
 - replacing, 84
- ‘academic’ writing style
 - and contractions, 37, 95
 - and personal opinion, 90
 - and problems with diction
 - and syntax, vii, 81–2, 94
- acronyms, punctuation of, 35
- apostrophes, 30–7
 - and acronyms, 35
 - as arrows, 32
 - and dates, 35
 - golden rule, 31
 - greengrocer’s, 35
 - to indicate missing letters, 37
 - to indicate possession, 31
 - and possessive pronouns (*yours, hers* etc.), 33
 - power to alter meaning, 30
 - proofreading for, 36
- argument
 - counter-argument, 97
 - and use of ‘I’, 88, 90
 - using paragraphs
 - to control development of, 52, 53, 55
 - using topic sentences to signpost, 58
 - within a single sentence, 65
- awkward phrasing, see syntax
- bullet points, 71–3
- central points, see key points; paragraphs
- cluttered writing style, see syntax
- colons, 4, 12, 16–24
 - common errors, 22–4
 - confusion with semicolon, 24
 - to improve concision, 16, 20
 - to introduce quotations, 12, 20–1
 - proofreading for, 24
 - special uses of, 22
- commas, 5–15
 - before *and, but, so* etc., 4, 7–8
 - and breathing, 5
 - ‘comma splice’, 1–4
 - common errors, 13–14

- with conjunctive adverbs (*however, therefore* etc.), 27
- to introduce quotations, 12, 21
- main uses, 6
- to mark off a concluding word or phrase, 10
- to mark off an introductory word or phrase, 8–9, 47–8
- origin of, 6
- ‘paired’ (parenthetical), 10–11
- power to alter meaning, 9, 14–15
- proofreading for, 15
- purpose of, 5
- to separate items in a list, 7, 28
- computer grammar-check facility, 95
- concision, 94
 - and colon use, 16, 20
- conjunctions (*and, but, so* etc.)
 - after commas, 4, 7–8
 - how to replace with semicolon, 26
- conjunctive adverbs (*however, therefore* etc.), 27, 29
- contractions (*you’re, won’t, didn’t* etc.)
 - and academic writing, 37, 95
 - punctuation of, 37
- dates, punctuation of, 35
- diction, see word choice
- first person, see ‘I’, use in essays
- flow (improving)
 - links between paragraphs, 55, 56
 - repeating key words, 70
 - using ‘recap’ words, 68–70
- full stops, 2, 3, 40, 42
- grammar-check facility, 95
- homophones, 95
 - ‘however’, 27, 29, 77
- ‘I’, use in essays, 86–91
 - and clarity, 88
 - inappropriate use of, 89
 - and personal opinion, 87, 88, 90, 91
 - in self-reflexive essays and reports, 88
- ideas
 - how to emphasise, 76–80
 - refining of, vii
 - using ‘I’ to assert, 88, 90
 - using paragraphs to organise, 51–2
 - see also key points; paragraphs (central points)
- identical-sounding words, see homophones

- introductory phrases, 8–9, 47–8
- 'it's' and 'its', 34
- key points
 - how to emphasise, 76–80
 - in introductions, 90
 - see *also* paragraphs (central points)
- linking ideas, see flow
- 'linking words and phrases'
 - examples of, 96–8
 - over-reliance on, 55
 - at start of paragraphs, 55
- main clauses, definition of, 3
- main points, see key points; paragraphs (central points)
- meaningless words and phrases, 94
- muddled thinking, 63, 93
- organisation
 - of ideas into paragraphs, 51–2
- paragraphs, 51–62
 - central points, 52, 56, 59
 - content of, 52–3
 - a formula for construction of, 53–4
 - links between, 55, 96–8
 - main points, see paragraphs (central points)
 - proofreading for clarity of, 56
 - purpose of, 51
 - pyramid structure, 53
 - topics, 59; see *also* topic sentences
- parallel sentence structure, 74–5
- past participles, 41
- personal opinion, see 'I'
- phrasing
 - useful phrases for essay writing, 96–8
- possessive pronouns (*yours, hers* etc.)
 - and apostrophes, 33, 36
- present participles (*-ing* words), 41, 66
- punctuation, 1–37
 - see *also* apostrophes; bullet points; colons; commas; full stops; semicolons
- quotations
 - phrases to introduce, 97
 - punctuation of, 11–12, 20–1
 - resuming an argument after, 97
- reading out loud, 42, 45, 48, 49, 93
- relative pronouns (*who, that, which* etc.), 65, 70
- role play, 93

- semicolons, 3, 24, 25–9
 - confusion with colon, 24
 - main uses, 26–9
 - proofreading for, 29
 - sentences, 39–49, 63–80
 - breaking into smaller units, 65–7
 - clarifying structure of, 46–9, 63–4, 74–5
 - controlling syntax in, 63–70, 81–5
 - definition of, 39, 40
 - fragments, 43–5
 - incomplete, 40, 43
 - proofreading for clarity of, 49
 - punctuation of, 42
 - ‘run-on’, 1–3
 - ‘standard sentence tester’, 42
 - strongest part of, 76–80
 - ‘springboard comments’, 53, 54
 - stem statements, 72–3
 - style, 63–91
 - see *also* concision; flow; key points; parallel sentence structure; sentences; syntax; word choice
 - subject (of a sentence), 39, 40, 41, 46, 47, 48, 49
 - definition and purpose of, 40, 46
 - starting with (to improve clarity), 47–8, 85
 - syntax
 - controlling longer sentences, 63–70
 - parallel sentence structure, 74–5
 - untangling awkward syntax, 64, 81–5
 - use of ‘I’ to simplify, 88
 - ‘therefore’, 27, 29,
 - topic sentences, 53, 54, 57–62
 - formula for writing, 61
 - proofreading for, 62
- verbs
 - finite, 40, 41
 - main, 46, 48, 49
 - non-finite, 41
 - tense, 40
 - word choice
 - deleting meaningless words, 94
 - introducing variety, 94
 - keeping it clear, vii, 81, 94