Run-ons: Fused Sentences and Comma Splices

Sample Errors

SAMPLE 1: X I did pretty well on the last test I got an 82.

SAMPLE 2: X The next test will be tougher, we're right to be worried about it.

What's the Problem?

A run-on sentence contains two independent clauses that have been joined together without correct punctuation. (An independent clause can be punctuated with a period as a complete sentence.) Run-on sentences fail to show the reader where one idea ends and the next idea begins.

There are two types of run-on sentence errors. When two independent clauses have been joined with no punctuation at all, the error is called a fused sentence. Sample 1 is an example of this type of error. When two independent clauses have been joined by a comma (without a coordinating conjunction like and, but, or), the error is called a comma splice. Sample 2 is an example of this type of error. Since fused sentence errors and comma splice errors have similar causes and correction strategies, we will treat them together as run-on sentences.

What Causes the Problem?

In most run-on sentences, the complete ideas expressed by two independent clauses are very closely related—so closely related, in fact, that the writer does not want to separate the ideas into two different sentences. Most often, the idea in the first independent clause is a statement or assertion, and the idea in the second independent clause comments on or reacts to the idea in the first. In a run-on sentence, the writer confuses the reader by failing to correctly signal where the first complete idea ends and the second complete idea begins.

Diagnostic Exercise

Correct all run-on errors in the following paragraph using the first correction as a model. The number in parentheses at the end of the paragraph indicates how many errors you should find.

My friend Miranda is a junior majoring in criminal justice. She plans to go to law school. Most law schools accept applicants from all majors, she thinks that majoring in criminal justice would help her prepare for law. All law schools do require good grades and a high score on the LSAT. Her grades are high she has about a 3.8 GPA currently.

She works very hard, she studies more than any person I know. She plans to take the LSAT this fall she will be studying
for it on top of everything else. I admire her energy, I’m sure she has what it takes to be a good law student. 

Fixing This Problem in Your Writing

Run-ons are easy to correct once you have identified them. The problem is finding them to begin with. Here are two techniques for spotting run-on sentences in your writing.

**IMAGINARY PERIOD TIP:** If a sentence contains two separate ideas, put an imaginary period between them. Now ask: Can BOTH parts that are divided by this imaginary period now stand alone as complete sentences? If both new sentences can stand alone, then the sentence is a run-on.

Here is the Imaginary Period Tip applied to the two sample sentences:

**SAMPLE 1:**

I did pretty well on the last test I got an 82.

**TIP APPLIED:** I did pretty well on the last test. I got an 82.

**SAMPLE 2:**

The next test will be tougher, we're right to be worried about it.

**TIP APPLIED:** The next test will be tougher. We're right to be worried about it.

In both cases, the two new sentences created by the imaginary period can stand alone as independent clauses. The Imaginary Period Tip shows us that both sample sentences are run-ons.

**I Realize Tip:** You can put I realize in front of most complete sentences and make a new grammatical sentence. However, when you put I realize in front of a fragment, the result will not make sense.

You might try combining the Imaginary Period Tip with the I Realize Tip. The I Realize Tip helps confirm that the two new sentences actually are independent clauses:

**TIP APPLIED:** I realize I did pretty well on the last test. 

**TIP APPLIED:** I realize the next test will be tougher.

The easiest way to correct run-ons is to punctuate the two independent clauses as complete sentences by using periods. Another way is to combine them with a comma and a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). A third way is to separate the two independent clauses with a semicolon (;). (Semicolons are followed by a single space and no capital letter.) A semicolon combines two independent clauses within the boundary of a single sentence. In other words, semicolons correctly accomplish the same goal that run-ons do incorrectly—they keep closely related ideas together within the same sentence. Here are the two sample sentences correctly punctuated with semicolons. We have used the Imaginary Period Tip to make certain each clause is independent.
SAMPLE 1. X I did pretty well on the last test I got an 82.

TIP APPLIED: I did pretty well on the last test. I got an 82.

CORRECTION: I did pretty well on the last test; I got an 82.

SAMPLE 2. X The next test will be tougher, we're right to be worried about it.

TIP APPLIED: The next test will be tougher. We're right to be worried about it.

CORRECTION: The next test will be tougher; we're right to be worried about it.

Sentence Practice 1

Find the independent clauses in the following run-on sentences by using either the Imaginary Period Tip or the I Realize Tip. Correct each run-on by inserting a semicolon between the two independent clauses or by adding a comma and a coordinating conjunction. If a sentence does not contain a run-on, write OK above it.

EXAMPLE: My friend owns two pigs he keeps them as house pets.

IMAGINARY My friend owns two pigs. He keeps them as house pets.

PERIOD TIP: I realize my friend owns two pigs. I realize he keeps them as house pets.

CORRECTION: My friend owns two pigs; he keeps them as house pets.

1. I write using a computer, I don't know what I would do without it.

2. It's about time you got here I was beginning to get worried!

3. A pidgin language is not a natural language people invent it when they do not share a common language.

4. My class is on the other side of campus, I have to run to get there on time.

5. My mom just finished Gone with the Wind, a book I lent her.

Sentence Practice 2

Find the independent clauses in the following run-on sentences by using either the Imaginary Period Tip or the I Realize Tip. Correct each run-on by inserting a semicolon between the two independent clauses or by adding a comma and a coordinating conjunction. If a sentence does not contain a run-on, write OK above it.

EXAMPLE: Susan has a portrait above her desk, it is her daughter.

IMAGINARY Susan has a portrait above her desk. It is her daughter.
PERIOD TIP.

I REALIZE TIP: I realize Susan has a portrait above her desk. I realize it is her daughter.

CORRECTION: Susan has a portrait above her desk; it is her daughter.

1. Some companies like one-page resumes, other companies want more detailed ones.

2. The game was postponed because it was raining.

3. Carmen made some of her salsa it was hotter than I expected.

4. The coldest place on Earth is the Pole of Cole in Antarctica, its annual mean temperature is -72'R

5. The Miracle Strip is Florida's largest beach, the sand on it is pure white quartz.

Sentence Practice 3

Combine each pair of sentences by attaching the second sentence to the first with a comma and an appropriate coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so).

EXAMPLE: My sister plans to go to college next year.
She is sending out dozens of applications now.

ANSWER: My sister plans to go to college next year, so she is sending out dozens of applications now.

1. I wasn't very hungry.
I thought I should eat something.

2. We need to eat the leftovers tonight.
We should freeze them for later.

3. Jill sold three of her paintings.
She got offers on four others.

4. Most people can't drive a car with a stick shift.
Rental companies have nothing but cars with automatic transmissions.

5. It really looked like rain.
The forecast was for sunshine.

Editing Practice 1

Correct all run-on errors in the following paragraph using the first correction as a model. The number in parentheses at the end of the paragraph indicates how many errors you should find.
Sausage is a popular food around the globe; it has been around for centuries. Nobody knows for sure who first thought of stuffing ground meat into a casing to form what we now call “sausage.” Over 3,500 years ago, the Babylonians made sausage, the ancient poet Homer referred to sausage in his classic work *The Odyssey*. Romans were particularly fond of sausages they made them from ground pork and pine nuts. In fact, the word sausage comes from the Latin word *salsus* it is roughly translated as “salty.” One Roman ruler thought sausages were divine, he would not permit the lower classes to eat them. (4)

**Editing Practice 2**

Correct all run-on errors in the following paragraphs using the first correction as a model. The number in parentheses at the end of each paragraph indicates how many errors you should find.

, but My cousin has never been the overly romantic type recently he put on quite a presentation when he proposed to his girlfriend. He did so on her birthday he put the ring inside a toy packet that he placed in a Cap'n Crunch box. It took a bit of effort to get her to open the cereal box and wade through the cereal to the “toy surprise” inside. He carefully timed the proceedings, he wanted to be sure that she found the ring during halftime of the Dallas Cowboys game on TV he was also sure to be reclining in his armchair. (3)

When she found the ring, he gallantly hit the mute button for the TV, he said that he would like for her to be his wife. The ring, by the way, was not a real wedding ring it was a plastic ring with a tiny boot jingling from it. She took it all in stride she knew he was just trying to make the event memorable by adding some humor. I suppose she appreciated his humor, she never did give him an answer. (4)

**Editing Practice 3**

Correct all run-on errors in the following paragraphs using the first correction as a model. The number in parentheses at the end of each paragraph indicates how many errors you should find.
Politeness is not as simple as it may seem; it certainly goes beyond table manners. Some language researchers argue that politeness is a way to show people that we approve of them or that we are not trying to tell them what to do or think. These researchers have studied diverse cultures and found that such politeness is a worldwide phenomenon, it is central to the human experience. (1)

Politeness is often subtle it does not have to be an explicit “thank you” or “please.” For instance, consider how you ask somebody to close a door you might say, "Will you close the door?" The question is not a demand, it is simply a request for information. The listener knows your real point but does not have to feel that he or she is being ordered around. (3)

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### Editing Checklist

**Identify Run-ons in Your Writing**

_____ If a sentence contains two ideas, insert an imaginary period between them. The sentence is a run-on if the two ideas can stand alone as independent clauses.

_____ After inserting an imaginary period, put I realize in front of each sentence to confirm that each is an independent clause.

**Correct Run-ons in Your Writing**

_____ Join two independent clauses with a semicolon or with a comma and a coordinating conjunction.

_____ Or, separate two independent clauses by using a period and making each into a separate sentence.

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If you combine two sentences, use the appropriate punctuation to separate the two ideas; a semicolon is one way to do so.