

CHAPTER 18

Comma Splices and Fused Sentences

A sentence or main clause contains at least a subject and a predicate, which together express a complete thought (see p. 233). We can separate two consecutive main clauses in one of four ways:

✓ **With a period:**

The ship was huge. Its mast stood eighty feet high.

✓ **With a semicolon:**

The ship was huge; its mast stood eighty feet high.

✓ **With a comma preceding a coordinating conjunction** that joins the clauses and specifies the relation between them:

The ship was huge, and its mast stood eighty feet high.

✓ **With a colon** when the second clause explains the first (see p. 477):

The ship was huge: its mast stood eighty feet high.

The period, semicolon, or colon alone or the comma plus coordinating conjunction signals readers that one main clause (complete thought) is ending and another is beginning.

The comma splice and the fused sentence deprive readers of this signal and often force them to reread for sense. In a **comma splice** the two main clauses are joined (or spliced) *only* with a comma, not with a coordinating conjunction as well.

Comma splice

The ship was huge, its mast stood eighty feet high.

In a **fused sentence** no punctuation or coordinating conjunction appears between the main clauses.

Fused sentence

The ship was huge its mast stood eighty feet high.

Exception Experienced writers sometimes use a comma without a coordinating conjunction between very brief main clauses that are grammatically parallel:

He's not a person, he's a monster.

However, many readers view such punctuation as incorrect. Unless you are certain that your readers will not object to the comma in a sentence like this one, separate the clauses with periods or semicolons, as described in this chapter.

Note Grammar and style checkers can detect many comma splices, but they will miss most fused sentences. For example, a checker flagged *Money is tight, we need to spend carefully* but not *Money is tight we need to spend carefully*. A checker may also question sentences that are actually correct, such as *Money being tighter now than before, we need to spend carefully*. Verify that revision is actually needed on any flagged sentence.

An English sentence may not include more than one main clause unless the clauses are separated by a comma and a coordinating conjunction or by a semicolon or colon. If your native language does not have such a rule or has accustomed you to writing long sentences, you may need to edit your English writing especially for comma splices and fused sentences.

Comma Splices

Separate two main clauses with a comma *only* when they are joined by a coordinating conjunction.

A comma cannot separate main clauses unless they are linked by a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet*). Readers expect the same main clause to continue after a comma alone. When they find themselves reading a second main clause before they realize they have finished the first, they may have to reread.

You have several options for revising comma splices.

v Making separate sentences

Revising a comma splice by making separate sentences from the main clauses will always be correct. The period is not only correct but preferable when the ideas expressed in the two main clauses are only loosely related:

Comma splice Chemistry has contributed much to our understanding of foods, many foods such as wheat and beans can be produced in the laboratory.

Revised Chemistry has contributed much to our understanding of foods. Many foods such as wheat and beans can be produced in the laboratory.

Making separate sentences may be the best option if you are used to writing very long sentences in your native language and often write comma splices in English.

v Inserting a coordinating conjunction

When the ideas in the main clauses are closely related and equally important, you may correct a comma splice by inserting the appropriate coordinating conjunction immediately after the comma to join the clauses:

Comma splice Some laboratory-grown foods taste good, they are nutritious.

Revised Some laboratory-grown foods taste good, and they are nutritious.

v Using a semicolon

If the relation between the ideas expressed in the main clauses is very close and obvious without a conjunction, you can separate the clauses with a semicolon.

Comma splice Good taste is rare in laboratory-grown vegetables, they are usually bland.

Revised Good taste is rare in laboratory-grown vegetables; they are usually bland.

v Subordinating one clause

When the idea in one clause is more important than that in the other, you can express the less important idea in a phrase or a subordinate clause. (See p. 253 for a list of subordinating conjunctions and pp. 398–402 for more on subordination.) Subordination is often more effective than forming separate sentences because it defines the relation between ideas more precisely:

Comma splice The vitamins are adequate, the flavor is deficient.

Revised The vitamins are adequate. The flavor is deficient. [Both ideas receive equal weight.]

Improved Even though the vitamins are adequate, the flavor is deficient. [Emphasis on the second idea.]

Separate main clauses related by *however, for example, and so on*.

Two kinds of words that are not conjunctions describe how one main clause relates to another:

- ✓ **Conjunctive adverbs**, such as *consequently, finally, hence, however, indeed, therefore, or thus*. (See p. 261 for a longer list.)
- ✓ Other **transitional expressions**, such as *even so, for example, in fact, of course, to the right, and to this end*. (See pp. 86–87 for a longer list.)

When two main clauses are related by a conjunctive adverb or a transitional expression, they must be separated by a period or by a semicolon. The adverb or expression is also generally set off by a comma or commas (see p. 437):

Comma splice Most Americans refuse to give up unhealthful habits, consequently our medical costs are higher than those of many other countries.

Revised Most Americans refuse to give up unhealthful habits. Consequently, our medical costs are higher than those of many other countries.

Revised Most Americans refuse to give up unhealthful habits; consequently, our medical costs are higher than those of many other countries.

Conjunctive adverbs and transitional expressions are different from coordinating conjunctions (*and, but, and so on*) and subordinating conjunctions (*although, because, and so on*):

- ✓ **Unlike conjunctions, conjunctive adverbs and transitional expressions do not join two clauses into a grammatical unit.** They merely describe the way two clauses relate in meaning.
- ✓ **Unlike conjunctions, conjunctive adverbs and transitional expressions can be moved within a clause** (see also p. 261). No matter where in the clause an adverb or expression falls, though, the clause must be separated from another main clause by a period or semicolon.

Comma splice

The increased time devoted to watching television is not the only cause of the decline in reading ability, however, it is one of the important causes.

Period

The increased time devoted to watching television is not the only cause of the decline in reading ability. However, it is one of the important causes.

Semicolon

The increased time devoted to watching television is not the only cause of the decline in reading ability; however, it is one of the important causes.

The increased time devoted to watching television is not the only cause of the decline in reading ability; it is, however, one of the important causes.

EXERCISE 18.1 Identifying and revising comma splices

Correct each comma splice below in *two* of the ways described on pages 344–46. If an item contains no comma splice, mark the number preceding it. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

Example:

Carolyn still had a headache, she could not get the child-proof cap off the aspirin bottle.

Carolyn still had a headache because she could not get the child-proof cap off the aspirin bottle.
[Subordination.]

Carolyn still had a headache, for she could not get the child-proof cap off the aspirin bottle.
[Coordinating conjunction.]

1. Money has a long history, it goes back at least as far as the earliest records.
2. Many of the earliest records concern financial transactions, in-deed, early history must often be inferred from commercial activity.
3. Every known society has had a system of money, though the objects serving as money have varied widely.

4. Sometimes the objects have had real value, in modern times, how-ever, their value has been more abstract.
5. Cattle, fermented beverages, and rare shells have served as money, each one had actual value for the society.

Fused Sentences

Combine two main clauses only with an appropriate conjunction or punctuation mark between them.

When two main clauses are joined without a word to connect them or a punctuation mark to separate them, the result is a **fused sentence**. Fused sentences can rarely be understood on first reading, and they are never acceptable in standard written English.

Fused Our foreign policy is not well defined it confuses many countries.

Fused sentences may be corrected in the same ways as comma splices. See pages 344–46.

Separate sentences

Our foreign policy is not well defined. It confuses many countries.

Comma and coordinating conjunction

Our foreign policy is not well defined, and it confuses many countries.

Semicolon

Our foreign policy is not well defined; it confuses many countries.

Subordinating conjunction

Because our foreign policy is not well defined, it confuses many countries.

EXERCISE 18.2 Identifying and revising fused sentences

Revise each of the fused sentences below in *two* of the four ways shown above. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

Example:

Tim was shy he usually refused invitations.

Tim was shy, so he usually refused invitations.

Tim was shy; he usually refused invitations.

1. Throughout history money and religion were closely linked there was little distinction between government and religion.
2. The head of state and the religious leader were often the same person all power rested in one ruler.
3. These powerful leaders decided what objects would serve as money their backing encouraged public faith in the money.
4. Coins were minted of precious metals the religious overtones of money were then strengthened.
5. People already believed the precious metals to be divine their use in money intensified its allure.

EXERCISE 18.3 Sentence combining: Comma splices and fused sentences

Combine each pair of sentences below into one sentence without creating a comma splice or fused sentence. Combine sentences by (1) supplying a comma and coordinating conjunction, (2) supplying a semicolon, or (3) subordinating one clause to the other. You will have to add, delete, or change words as well as punctuation. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

Example:

The sun sank lower in the sky. The colors gradually faded.

As the sun sank lower in the sky, the colors gradually faded. [The first clause is subordinated to the second.]

1. The exact origin of paper money is unknown. It has not survived as coins, shells, and other durable objects have.
2. Perhaps goldsmiths were also bankers. Thus they held the gold of their wealthy customers.
3. The goldsmiths probably gave customers receipts for their gold. These receipts were then used in trade.
4. The goldsmiths were something like modern-day bankers. Their receipts were something like modern-day money.
5. The goldsmiths became even more like modern-day bankers. They began issuing receipts for more gold than they actually held in their vaults.

EXERCISE 18.4 Revising: Comma splices and fused sentences

Identify and revise the comma splices and fused sentences in the following paragraph. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

All those parents who urged their children to eat broccoli were right, the vegetable really is healthful. Broccoli contains sulforaphane, moreover, this mustard oil can be found in kale and Brussels sprouts. Sulforaphane causes the body to make an enzyme that attacks carcinogens, these substances cause cancer. The enzyme speeds up the work of the kidneys then they can flush harmful chemicals out of the body. Other vegetables have similar benefits however, green, leafy vegetables like broccoli are the most efficient. Thus wise people will eat their broccoli it could save their lives.

Note See page 381 for an exercise involving comma splices and fused sentences along with other sentence errors.

<http://www.ablongman.com/littlebrown>

Visit the companion Web site for more help and additional exercises on comma splices and fused sentences.

Situations that may produce comma splices and fused sentences

√ **The first clause is negative; the second, positive:**

Splice Petric is not a nurse, she is a doctor.

Revised Petric is not a nurse; she is a doctor.

√ **The second clause amplifies or illustrates the first:**

Fused She did well in college her average was 3.9.

Revised She did well in college; her average was 3.9.

√ **The second clause contains a conjunctive adverb or other transitional expression, such as *however* or *for example* (see p. 346):**

Splice She had intended to become a biologist, however, medicine seemed more exciting.

Revised She had intended to become a biologist; however, medicine seemed more exciting.

√ **The subject of the second clause repeats or refers to the subject of the first clause:**

Fused Petric is an internist she practices in Topeka.

Revised Petric is an internist. She practices in Topeka.

√ **Splicing or fusing is an attempt to link related ideas or to smooth choppy sentences:**

Splice She is very committed to her work, she devotes almost all her time to patient care.

Revised Because she is very committed to her work, she devotes almost all her time to patient care.

Revised She is so committed to her work that she devotes almost all her time to patient care.

√ **Words identifying the speaker divide a quotation between two complete sentences. (See p. 444 for the punctuation to use in this case.)**

Splice "Medicine is a human frontier," Petric says, "The boundaries are unknown."

Revised "Medicine is a human frontier," Petric says. "The boundaries are unknown."

Revision of comma splices and fused sentences

1. **Underline the main clauses in your draft.**
2. **When two main clauses fall in the same sentence, check the connection between them.**
3. **If nothing falls between the clauses or only a comma does, revise in one of the following ways.** The revision depends on the relation you want to establish between the clauses. (See the text discussion for examples.)

- √ Make the clauses into separate sentences.
- √ Insert a comma followed by *and*, *but*, or another coordinating conjunction. Or, if the comma is already present, insert just the coordinating conjunction.
- √ Insert a semicolon between clauses.
- √ Subordinate one clause to the other.