Fragments and Run-ons

What this handout is about

If instructors have ever returned your papers with “frag,” “S.F.,” “R.O.,” or “run-on” written in the margin, you may find this handout useful. It will help you locate and correct sentence fragments and run-ons.

The basics

Before we get to the problems and how to fix them, let’s take a minute to review some information that is so basic you’ve probably forgotten it.

What is a complete sentence? A complete sentence is not merely a group of words with a capital letter at the beginning and a period or question mark at the end. **A complete sentence has three components:**

1. a subject (the actor in the sentence)
2. a predicate (the verb or action), and
3. a complete thought (it can stand alone and make sense—it’s independent).

Some sentences can be very short, with only two or three words expressing a complete thought, like this:

John waited.

This sentence has a subject (John) and a verb (waited), and it expresses a complete thought. We can understand the idea completely with just those two words, so again, it’s independent—an independent clause. But independent clauses (i.e., complete sentences) can be expanded to contain a lot more information, like this:

John waited for the bus all morning.

John waited for the bus all morning in the rain last Tuesday.

Wishing he’d brought his umbrella, John waited for the bus all morning in the rain last Tuesday.

Wishing he’d brought his umbrella and dreaming of his nice warm bed, John waited for the bus all morning in the rain last Tuesday, determined to make it to class for his test.

As your sentences grow more complicated, it gets harder to spot and stay focused on the basic elements of a complete sentence, but if you look carefully at the examples above, you’ll see that the main thought is still that John waited—one main subject and one main verb. No matter how long or short the other sentence parts are, none of them can stand alone and make sense.

Being able to find the main subject, the main verb, and the complete thought is the first trick to learn for identifying fragments and run-ons.

Sentence fragments

A sentence fragment is an incomplete sentence. Some fragments are incomplete because they lack either a subject or a verb, or both. The fragments that most students have trouble with, however, are dependent clauses—they have a subject and a verb, so they look like complete sentences, but they don’t express a complete thought. They’re called “dependent” because they can’t stand on their own (just like some people you might know who are SO dependent!). Look at these dependent clauses. They’re just begging for more information to make the thoughts complete:

Because his car was in the shop (…What did he do?)

After the rain stops (…What then?)

When you finally take the test (…What will happen?)

Since you asked (…Will you get the answer?)

If you want to go with me (…What should you do?)

Does each of these examples have a subject? Yes. Does each have a verb? Yes. So what makes the thought incomplete? It’s the first word (Because, After, When, Since, If). These words belong to a special class of words called subordinators or subordinating conjunctions. If you know something about subordinating conjunctions, you can probably eliminate 90% of your fragments.

**First, you need to know that subordinating conjunctions do three things:**

1. join two sentences together
2. make one of the sentences dependent on the other for a complete thought (make one a dependent clause)
3. indicate a logical relationship

Second, you need to recognize the subordinators when you see them.**Here is a list of common subordinating conjunctions and the relationships they indicate:**

* **Cause / Effect:** because, since, so that
* **Comparison / Contrast:** although, even though, though, whereas, while
* **Place & Manner:** how, however, where, wherever
* **Possibility / Conditions:** if, whether, unless
* **Relation:** that, which, who
* **Time:** after, as, before, since, when, whenever, while, until

Third, you need to know that the subordinator (and the whole dependent clause) doesn’t have to be at the beginning of the sentence. The dependent clause and the independent clause can switch places, but the whole clause moves as one big chunk. Look at how these clauses switched places in the sentence:

Because his car was in the shop, John took the bus.

John took the bus because his car was in the shop.

Finally, you need to know that every dependent clause needs to be attached to an independent clause (remember, the independent clause can stand on its own).

How do you find and fix your fragments? Remember the basics: subject, verb, and complete thought. If you can recognize those things, you’re halfway there. Then, scan your sentences for subordinating conjunctions. If you find one, first identify the whole chunk of the dependent clause (the subject and verb that go with the subordinator), and then make sure they’re attached to an independent clause.

John took the bus. (Independent clause. So far, all is well!)

Because his car was in the shop. (Dependent clause all by itself. Uh oh! Fragment!)

John took the bus because his car was in the shop.

Run-ons

These are also called fused sentences. You are making a run-on when you put two complete sentences (a subject and its predicate and another subject and its predicate) together in one sentence without separating them properly. Here’s an example of a run-on:

My favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus it is very garlicky.

This one sentence actually contains two complete sentences. But in the rush to get that idea out, I made it into one incorrect sentence. Luckily, there are many ways to correct this run-on sentence.

You could use a semicolon:

My favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus; it is very garlicky.

You could use a comma and a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so):

My favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus, for it is very garlicky. -OR- My favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus, and it is very garlicky.

You could use a subordinating conjunction (see above):

My favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus because it is very garlicky. -OR- Because it is so garlicky, my favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus.

You could make it into two separate sentences with a period in between:

My favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus. It is very garlicky.

You could use an em-dash (a long dash) for emphasis:

My favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus—it is very garlicky.

You CANNOT simply add a comma between the two sentences, or you’ll end up with what’s called a “comma splice.” Here’s an example of a comma splice:

My favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus, it is very garlicky.

You can fix a comma splice the same way you fix a run-on—either change the punctuation or add a conjunction. The good news is that writers tend to be either comma splicers or run-on artists, but almost never both. Which one are you? If you have particular trouble with comma splices, try looking at our handout on [commas](https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/commas/).

Finding run-ons

As you can see, fixing run-ons is pretty easy once you see them—but how do you find out if a sentence is a run-on if you aren’t sure? Rei R. Noguchi, in his book Grammar and the Teaching of Writing, recommends two methods for testing your sentences. **Try these two tests:**

1. Turn your sentences into yes/no questions.
2. Turn your sentences into tag questions (sentences that end with a questioning phrase at the very end—look at our examples below).

These are two things that nearly everyone can do easily if the sentence is not a run-on, but they become next to impossible if it is.

Look at the following sentence:

My favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus.

If you turn it into a question that someone could answer with a yes or no, it looks like this:

Is my favorite Mediterranean spread hummus?

If you turn it into a tag question, it looks like this:

My favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus, isn’t it?

The first sentence is complete and not a run-on, because our test worked.

Now, look again at the original run-on sentence:

My favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus it is very garlicky.

The yes/no question can only be made with each separate thought, not the sentence as a whole:

Is my favorite Mediterranean spread hummus? Is it very garlicky?

But not:

Is my favorite Mediterranean spread hummus is it very garlicky?

The tag question can also only be made with each separate thought, rather than the whole:

My favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus, isn’t it? It’s very garlicky, isn’t it?

But never:

My favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus it is very garlicky, isn’t it?

Unlike the complete sentence, the run-on sentence doesn’t pass these tests. When you try to turn the run-on sentence into a single question, you immediately see that the sentence has more than one complete concept. Make sure you try both tests with each of your problem sentences, because you may trick yourself by just putting a tag on the last part and not noticing that it doesn’t work on the first. Some people might not notice that “My favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus it is very garlicky isn’t it?” is wrong, but most people will spot the yes/no question problem right away.

Every once in a while, you or your instructor will see a really long sentence and think it’s a run-on when it isn’t. Really long sentences can be tiring but not necessarily wrong—just make sure that yours aren’t wrong by using the tests above.

## Run-On Sentences

A run-on sentence occurs when two or more [independent clauses](http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/grammar/sentencestructure#s-lg-box-9131419) (also known as complete sentences) are connected improperly.

**Example**: I love to write papers I would write one every day if I had the time.

There are two complete sentences in the above example:

**Sentence 1**: I love to write papers.  
   
**Sentence 2**: I would write one every day if I had the time.

One common type of run-on sentence is a comma splice. A comma splice occurs when two [independent clauses](http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/grammar/sentencestructure#s-lg-box-9131419) are joined with just a comma.

**Example of a comma splice:** Participants could leave the study at any time, they needed to indicate their preference.

**Sentence 1**: Participants could leave the study at any time.  
   
**Sentence 2**: They needed to indicate their preference.

Some comma splices occur when a writer attempts to use a transitional expression in the middle of a sentence.

**Example of a comma splice:** The results of the study were inconclusive, therefore more research needs to be done on the topic.

**Sentence 1**: The results of the study were inconclusive  
   
**Transitional expression** (conjunctive adverb): therefore  
   
**Sentence 2:** More research needs to be done on the topic

To fix this type of comma splice, use a semicolon before the transitional expression and add a comma after it. See more examples of this on the [semicolon](http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/punctuation/semicolons) page.

**Revision:** The results of the study were inconclusive**; therefore,** more research needs to be done on the topic.

You can correct a run-on sentence by connecting or separating its parts correctly. There are several easy ways to connect independent clauses.

## Correcting Run-On Sentences

A run-on sentence can be fixed by connecting its parts correctly. There are several ways to connect independent clauses.

1. **Use a**[**period**](http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/punctuation/periods). The easiest way to fix a run-on is to split the sentence into smaller sentences using a period. This revision works especially well with longer sentences. Check, however, to make sure that this solution does not result in short, choppy sentences.

**Revision example**: I love to write papers. I would write one every day if I had the time.

1. **Use a**[**semicolon**](http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/punctuation/semicolons). Inserting a semicolon between independent clauses creates a grammatically correct sentence. Using a semicolon is a stylistic choice that establishes a close relationship between the two sentences.

**Revision example**: I love to write papers; I would write one every day if I had the time.

1. **Use a**[**comma**](http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/punctuation/commas)**and a**[**coordinating conjunction**](http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/grammar/conjunctions). A comma, paired with a coordinating conjunction (such as and, but, or or), corrects a run-on sentence. This method emphasizes the relationship between the two clauses.

**Revision example**: I love to write papers, **and** I would write one every day if I had the time.

1. **Use a**[**subordinating conjunction**](http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/grammar/conjunctions#s-lg-box-3032417). Turn one of the independent clauses into a [dependent clause](http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/grammar/sentencestructure#s-lg-box-9131419). A subordinating conjunction (such as because, unless, and although) connects two clauses to create a [complex sentence](http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/grammar/sentencestructure#s-lg-box-9131423). This option works to cement the relationship between the two parts of the sentence and may improve the flow of the clauses.

**Example**: **Because I love to write papers**, I would write one every day if I had the time.

However you decide to revise for run-on sentences, remember that maintaining [sentence variety](http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/scholarlyvoice/sentencestructure) helps to keep the writing clear and interesting for your readers.

## Sentence Fragments

A sentence fragment is a string of words that does not form a complete sentence; there is a  [necessary component of a complete sentence](http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/grammar/sentencestructure" \l "s-lg-box-9131420) missing. This missing component may be a subject (usually a noun) or a predicate (verb or verb phrase) and/or when the sentence does not express a complete idea.

Here is an example of a fragment with a missing subject.

**Example of a fragment**: Shows no improvement in any of the vital signs.

The sentence above is a fragment since there is no subject (Who shows no improvement?). Fragments can be corrected by identifying the missing element and including it.

**Revision:** **The patient** shows no improvement in any of the vital signs.

Here is an example of a fragment with a missing predicate, or action:

**Example of a fragment**: The doctors, who were using peer-reviewed research articles that contributed to the body of knowledge in their fields, which was obstetrics.

Notice here that although the sentence is quite long, it still contains no action (What are the doctors doing?). Once identified, the sentence can be corrected easily.

**Revision:** The doctors, who were using peer-reviewed research articles that contributed to the body of knowledge in their field, **improved their knowledge of**obstetrics.

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Notice here that although the sentence is quite long, it still contains no action (What are the doctors doing?). Once identified, the sentence can be corrected easily.

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FRAGMENTS AND RUN-ONS

This module will cover run on sentences, comma splices and fragments. It will enable the student to identify potential run-ons and fragments as well as determine the appropriate way to fix them Fragments are sentences that are incomplete. A sentence can be considered a fragment if: It begins with the words which, because, although, before, while, whether, whenever, unless, if, after, since, when, until, by, as long as, even though, whereas, AND is a DEPENDENT CLAUSE. A DEPENDENT CLAUSE is a sentence that can have a subject and a verb, but does not express a complete thought. The words in the box are called SUBORDINATORS because they render a sentence subordinate or unable to stand on its own. Here are a few examples of fragments (or, dependent clauses with subordinators) at the beginning Fragment Correct Way (Not a fragment) If I go to school today. If I go to school today, then I will take the test. Unless love finds me. Unless love finds me, I will always be unhappy. After you leave. After you leave, I will be sad. It is missing a subject or verb Here are a few fragments that are missing the subject or the verb Fragment Correct Way (Not a fragment) Lilies from the valley. I can smell the lilies from the valley Plays in the dark. The theater puts on plays in the dark. Pumpkins in the grass. Let me see the pumpkins in the grass.

If the noun is followed by the words who, which, or that Here are a few examples of fragments that have the words which, that or who following the noun Fragment Correct Way (Not a fragment) Children that sing. The children that sing in the choir will be over for dinner. A dancer who steals. A dance who steals the show will impress the audience. People that laugh. People who laugh tend to be happy. How can one turn a fragment into a complete sentence? One may simply add to the sentence what is lacking. For example As long as I have you. As long as I have you, nothing can stand in our way.

This fragment can be fixed by adding an INDEPENDENT CLAUSE. An independent clause is a sentence that can stand alone because it has a subject and a verb and conveys a complete thought. Independent clauses are basically regular sentences. Running in the streets. Sam is running in the streets. We can fix this fragment by adding what it is lacking, a subject. In the corrected sentence, the subject is Sam. Papers from the office. Please put away these papers from the office. This fragment can be fixed by adding what is lacking. In this example, a verb is what is lacking. In the corrected sentence, the verb is put. Please try the following exercises on your own or with the help of a tutor. If the sentence is a fragment, circle it. Then rewrite the fragment as a complete sentence. 1. Sarah likes to play cards. 2. Playing cards at night. 3. Fairy princesses from the sky. 4. Pecan pie is my favorite kind of pie. 5. Nothing makes sense anymore.

7. Please tell the teacher to go away. 8. If I go to the florist. 9. Teachers who don’t like to read. 10. Tell me why you feel this way

11. Flowers on the grave. 12. While she was sleeping. RUN-ON SENTENCES AND COMMA SPLICES Before you begin this lesson, it would be helpful to know what the words INDEPENDENT CLAUSE mean. An INDEPENDENT CLAUSE is simply normal sentence. This means it has a subject, verb and expresses a complete thought Here are a few examples of independent clauses. I went to the store today. The football game was fun. Please make sure she doesn’t forget her keys. A sentence can be considered a RUN-ON if it joins two independent clauses with a comma or no punctuation at all. A run-on sentence that has two independent clauses joined by a comma is called a COMMA SPLICE. Here are a few examples of sentences with comma splices. My head hurts, I took some Advil. Mary went to the market, she bought some apples. I went the part last night, I need to sleep in this mornings. Here are a few more examples of run-on sentences We showed up late and the hostess was mad, but she let us in anyway. Alyssa picked up the new vampire romance book from the library she read it as soon as she got

home. Greg likes football all he does is watch football all the time. Run-on sentences can be confusing to a reader because they put too many ideas into one sentence. How can one fix a run-on sentence? Here are a few ways to do just that. One way is join the two independent clauses with a COORDINATOR. The following words are coordinators. For And Nor But Or Yet So The acronym FANBOYS is an easy way to remember these words. Always be sure to put a comma before the coordinator.

Here are a few examples of run-on sentences joined by a coordinator. RUN-ON Mary needed to tell him the truth she refused to speak a word. Peeta likes to bake Katniss likes to shoot arrows Corrected with a coordinator Mary needed to tell him the truth, but she refused to speak a word. Peeta likes to bake, and Katniss likes to shoot arrows. Another way to repair a run-on sentence is to join the two independent clauses with a SUBORDINATOR. Here are a few common subordinators. although, after, as if, because, even though , that, until, unless, wherever, whether, which, while, since, if, as long as Here are a few examples of run-on sentences fixed by using a subordinator RUN-ON Alex can play outside he has to finish his dinner. Michael wasn’t paying attention the teacher was looking right at him. Corrected by adding a subordinator Alex can play outside, as long as he finishes his dinner. James wasn’t paying attention, even though the teacher was looking right at him. Run-on sentences can separated by a semicolon. A semicolon may work best if an adequate word

cannot be found to join the two sentences. Here are a few examples. RUN-ON Michael followed Alyssa into her room he closed the door behind them Stefan had run away Elena refused to follow him Corrected with a semicolon Michael followed Alyssa into her room; he closed the door behind them. Stefan had run away; Elena refused to follow him.

Lastly, a run-on sentence can be broken up by a period. The independent clauses are then separated into their own sentences. Here are a few examples of run-on sentences broken up by a period. RUN-ON The milkman came earlier he left the milk bottle on the porch. I had to pick up my son from daycare he was sick. Sookie wanted to be with Bill she wanted to be with Eric too Corrected by separating the clauses with a period The milkman came earlier. He left the milk on the porch. I had to pick up my son from daycare. He was sick. Sookie wanted to be with Bill. She wanted to be with Eric too. Please attempt the following exercises either by yourself or with a tutor. Identify whether or not the sentence is a run-on. If it is, rewrite the correct way using one of the methods given above. 1. I can’t wait I have to get to school now I’m going to be late. 2. Let’s go to the park after the movie, and then we can watch the sunset. 3. I’m going to make spaghetti, but I’m all out of pasta. 4. Please stop bothering me you are really getting on my nerves

5. Ashley worked for more than eight hours she didn’t receive the overtime pay she deserved. 6. Sarah asked the teacher if she could bring her pet frog to school, but the teacher said no. 7. You can go to the park, after you put on your shoes. 8. I didn’t want her at the party, so we asked her to leave. 9. Alex needed to finish a paper he stayed at the library all night. 10. The professor reminded her students of the importance of studying for the final she did not want her students to fail

Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout’s topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the [UNC Libraries citation tutorial](http://www.lib.unc.edu/instruct/citations/).

Hacker, Diana. A Writer’s Reference. 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003.

Hairston, Maxine, John Ruszkiewicz and Christy Friend. The Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers. 6th ed. New York: Longman, 2002.

Lunsford, Andrea A. and Robert Connors. St. Martin’s Handbook. 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003. (specifically Chapter 7)

Noguchi, Rei R. Grammar and the Teaching of Writing: Limits and Possibilities. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1991.