

# Avoiding Run-Ons and Comma Splices

*the incorrect joining of two independent clauses*

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## Recognizing Run-Ons and Comma Splices

*Run-on sentences* (also called *fused sentences*) and *comma splices* are errors in which two independent clauses (complete sentences) are joined incorrectly. In a run-on sentence, two independent clauses are joined without any punctuation whatsoever. In a comma splice, the clauses are joined by a comma alone, rather than by a comma and coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, nor, for, so, or yet*). Both run-ons and comma splices are confusing to readers since there are no clues to let readers know that a new sentence has started.

*Run-on sentence:* The smoke was thick they had trouble advancing.  
*Comma splice:* The smoke was thick, they had trouble advancing.

There are several ways to correct run-ons and comma splices. The best option will vary, depending on the content of the sentences and the relation between them.

## Making Separate Sentences

One fix is simply to write the clauses as two separate sentences.

The smoke was thick. They had trouble advancing.

This option is not always desirable, however. The two sentences above are short and choppy, and the relation between the two is not clear. For these sentences, it will be better to find another solution. (Alternate solutions are presented on the following pages.)

Dividing clauses into two separate sentences works best when one or both of the clauses are long.

*Comma splice:* The driver said that she didn't see the children before they dashed out into the street, they apparently ran out from behind a parked car.  
*Revised:* The driver said that she didn't see the children before they dashed out into the street. They apparently ran out from behind a parked car.

**In a run-on sentence, two independent clauses are joined without any punctuation.**

**Eye and head protection are required don't enter without it.**  
(wrong)



**In a comma splice, two independent clauses are joined by a comma alone.**

**Eye and head protection are required, don't enter without it.**  
(wrong)

This option also works well with different types of sentences, for example, when one is a statement and the other is a question.

- Run-on:* I need help teaching CPR this weekend will you be able to help me?  
*Revised:* I need help teaching CPR this weekend. Will you be able to help me?

## Using a Comma and a Coordinating Conjunction

If two clauses are closely related and equally important, they can be joined with a comma and a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, nor, for, so, or yet*).

- The smoke was thick, *so* they had trouble advancing.  
We know who killed her, *but* we just can't prove it.

## Using a Semicolon

Two closely related clauses can be joined with a semicolon.

- We know who killed her; we just can't prove it.

When the relation between the clauses might not be clear using a semicolon alone, you can add a conjunctive adverb or transitional expression. (These are words or phrases such as *however, therefore, and as a result* that help create a smoother transition between ideas.) Just remember that when you use one of these expressions, you must put either a semicolon or a period between the clauses. A comma between the clauses will result in a comma splice.

- Comma splice:* The smoke was thick, *as a result*, they had trouble advancing.  
*Revised:* The smoke was thick; *as a result*, they had trouble advancing.

Unlike coordinating conjunctions, conjunctive adverbs and transitional expressions can be positioned elsewhere in the sentence. However, regardless of where they are positioned, the two independent clauses must be separated by a period or a semicolon.

- Run-on:* Seven children were injured in the accident only one required hospitalization.  
*Revised:* Seven children were injured in the accident; *however*, only one required hospitalization.  
*Revised:* Seven children were injured in the accident; only one, *however*, required hospitalization.  
*Revised:* Seven children were injured in the accident; only one required hospitalization, *however*.

**Closely related clauses of equal importance can be joined with a comma and a coordinating conjunction.**

***The man is dangerous, so be careful.***



**Two closely related clauses can be joined with a semicolon.**

***He has killed at least three people; he may have killed more.***

The following are examples of other conjunctive adverbs and transitional expressions that may be used when joining two clauses.

also	however	nonetheless
anyway	in addition	of course
as a result	indeed	on the other hand
besides	in fact	otherwise
consequently	in other words	similarly
finally	instead	still
for example	likewise	then
furthermore	meanwhile	therefore
hence	moreover	thus

### Making One Clause Subordinate to the Other

Often the most effective way to fix a run-on sentence or a comma splice is to make one clause subordinate to the other, meaning the less important idea is de-emphasized to make the more important one stand out. Subordination generally shows the relation between the ideas more clearly than any other option. There are a couple of ways to achieve subordination. One is to join two clauses by using a subordinating conjunction, such as *after*, *although*, *because*, *before*, *unless*, and *whereas*. The other is to convert one clause to a phrase that modifies the main idea.

They had trouble advancing *because* the smoke was thick.

The smoke was thick, *making it difficult for them to advance*.

Here are two more examples.

*Comma splice:* She has not fully recovered from her injuries, she is well enough to come home from the hospital.

*Revised:* *Even though* she is well enough to come home from the hospital, she has not fully recovered from her injuries.

*Run-on:* Jason made his way to the exit he pulled his injured partner to safety.

*Revised:* Jason made his way to the exit, *pulling* his injured partner to safety.



**Subordination  
generally shows  
the relation  
between the  
ideas more  
clearly than any  
other option.**



***I called the  
police tonight  
because there's  
been a lot of  
suspicious  
activity in the  
neighborhood.***

## Test Your Knowledge

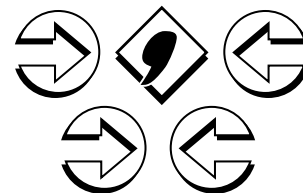
For each of the sentences below, put a “CS” next to the sentence if it contains a comma splice, an “RO” next to it if it contains a run-on, or an “OK” next to it if it is punctuated properly. If the sentence contains a comma splice or run-on, identify how you might correct it. (More than one option might be possible.)

### Example:

CS The smoke was thick, I had trouble advancing  
*Revised: The smoke was thick, so I had trouble advancing.*

1. \_\_\_\_\_ There was nothing anyone could have done to save David he had sustained severe internal injuries in the crash.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Because the building had a common attic, the fire spread quickly to adjoining occupancies.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ The patient was complaining of chest pains, he also had difficulty breathing.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ The ceiling collapsed without warning, and one firefighter was killed.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ We pulled everyone back just in time the tank ruptured, sending debris at least half a mile in every direction.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ Chris and I took the first line in through the front door, Bob and Patty came through the side entrance.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ We didn't see the hydrant hidden behind the bushes and had to lay 800 feet of five-inch hose.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ It was a hit-and-run accident the police arrested the driver at his home three miles away.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ Engine 1 assumed fire attack, Engine 2 laid a supply line, and Truck 1 ventilated the roof.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ Roy was convicted of involuntary manslaughter, he killed one person and injured two others after causing a collision while driving under the influence of alcohol.

**Comma splices and run-ons are confusing to readers since there are no clues to let readers know that a new sentence has started.**



**The best option for correcting comma splices and run-ons will vary, depending on the content of the sentences and the relation between them.**

## Check Your Answers

The following are suggested answers to the quiz on the previous page. However, many have more than one possible solution.

1. RO There was nothing anyone could have done to save David. He had sustained severe internal injuries in the crash.
2. OK *No correction needed.*
3. CS The patient was complaining of chest pains and difficulty breathing.
4. OK *No correction needed.*
5. RO We pulled everyone back just in time. The tank ruptured, sending debris at least half a mile in every direction.
6. CS Chris and I took the first line in through the front door, while Bob and Patty came through the side entrance.
7. OK *No correction needed.*
8. RO It was a hit-and-run accident. The police arrested the driver at his home three miles away.
9. OK *No correction needed.*
10. CS Roy was convicted of involuntary manslaughter because he killed one person and injured two others after causing a collision while driving under the influence of alcohol.



## For More Information

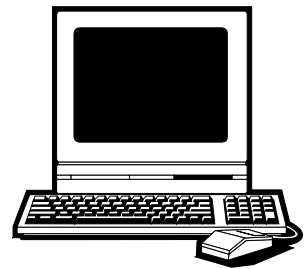
This newsletter is adapted from Chapter 14 of *Take Command of Your Writing* by Jill Meryl Levy. *Take Command of Your Writing* is the first comprehensive guide to more effective writing geared specifically for emergency services personnel. It is an essential resource for anyone who wants to present ideas more effectively, write more accurate reports, and create more readable and user-friendly documents of any kind. It is also an excellent tool for anyone who wants to place higher on promotional exams requiring any kind of writing exercise.

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**Comma splices  
and run-ons  
can generally be  
fixed in one of  
four ways:**



- 1. By making separate sentences.**
- 2. By using a comma and a coordinating conjunction.**
- 3. By using a semicolon.**
- 4. By making one clause subordinate to the other.**