



Independent Clause Errors

This handout identifies the common errors with linking independent clauses and then describes the five most common techniques for correcting these errors.

Comma Splice

The term *comma splice* refers to the linking of two independent clauses with a comma alone, a punctuation error. An independent clause is a construction with a subject and predicate, one that could stand alone as a complete thought.

X: Childhood obesity is on the rise in America, many parents are beginning to set tougher dietary guidelines for their kids.

A *comma splice* usually occurs when we sense a relationship between two ideas. The relationship above is one of cause and result—the rise in obesity has caused many parents to monitor what their kids eat. But the comma alone is not the correct way to link the ideas in the two clauses. The *Strategies* section below discusses correct methods.

While proofreading your work, be on the lookout for this error. If you think you've found a comma splice but do not feel certain, try taking the two ideas apart to determine whether each could stand alone as a sentence:

Childhood obesity is on the rise in America.

Many parents are beginning to set tougher dietary guidelines for their kids.

Each sentence is an independent clause with a subject and predicate so may not be linked with a comma alone.

Fused Sentence

The term *fused sentence* describes two or more independent clauses run together with no punctuation or coordinating conjunction, a grammatical error. Some handbooks call this a *run-on sentence*, but *The St. Martin's Handbook*, used in composition class at the University of Arkansas, makes no distinction between the terms. The following is an example:

X: In *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine advocates independence from the corrupt British monarchy his work *The Age of Reason* criticizes churches as institutions designed "to terrify and enslave mankind."

This error also occurs when we include the conjunction but forget the punctuation:

X: In *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine advocates independence from the corrupt British monarchy and his work *The Age of Reason* criticizes churches as institutions designed "to terrify and enslave mankind."

Each clause can stand alone as a sentence, so we have a *fused sentence*.

In *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine advocates independence from the corrupt British monarchy. His work *The Age of Reason* criticizes churches as institutions designed “to terrify and enslave mankind.”

In the next section we detail the ways to correct these errors.

Strategies for Correcting Comma Splices and Fused Sentences:

(1) Make two sentences.

✓: Childhood obesity is on the rise in America. Many parents are beginning to set tougher dietary guidelines for their kids.

✓: In *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine advocates independence from the corrupt British monarchy. His work *The Age of Reason* criticizes churches as institutions designed “to terrify and enslave mankind.”

(2) Use a semicolon between the two independent clauses.

✓: Childhood obesity is on the rise in America; many parents are beginning to set tougher dietary guidelines for their kids.

✓: In *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine advocates independence from the corrupt British monarchy; his work *The Age of Reason* criticizes churches as institutions designed “to terrify and enslave mankind.”

(3) Link the clauses with a comma and a coordinating conjunction (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*).

✓: Childhood obesity is on the rise in America, so many parents are beginning to set tougher dietary guidelines for their kids.

✓: In *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine advocates independence from the corrupt British monarchy, and his work *The Age of Reason* criticizes churches as institutions designed “to terrify and enslave mankind.”

(4) Add a semicolon and a conjunctive adverb (such as *however, also, besides*) or transitional expression, and then a comma to link the clauses.

✓: Childhood obesity is on the rise in America; consequently, many parents are beginning to set tougher dietary guidelines for their kids.

✓: In *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine advocates independence from the corrupt British monarchy; in addition, his work *The Age of Reason* criticizes churches as institutions designed “to terrify and enslave mankind.”

(5) Recast one independent clause as a dependent clause by introducing it with a subordinating conjunction (such as *although, because, after*).

✓: Because childhood obesity is on the rise in America, many parents are beginning to set tougher dietary guidelines for their kids.

✓: After Thomas Paine advocated independence from the corrupt British monarchy in *Common Sense*, he wrote his work *The Age of Reason*, in which he criticized churches as institutions designed “to terrify and enslave mankind.”

NOTE: Experienced writers sometimes use comma splices, run-ons, fused sentences, and even sentence fragments for effect. Good writers who use them have consciously chosen these constructions and have carefully considered the effect these nonstandard constructions will have on their audiences.

Practice writing correct sentence forms, and proofread your papers carefully for punctuation errors. Once you master these techniques and know how to construct a correct sentence effortlessly, you might consider using nonstandard punctuation for effect. But beware: you must first demonstrate to your composition instructor that you have mastered the rules before you consider bending them.

Works Consulted

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- Paine, Thomas. *Common Sense*. Philadelphia: W. & T. Bradford, 1776. *Project Gutenberg.org*. Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Web. 28 July 2016.
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