

Common Sentence Errors

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As crazy, long, interesting, and complicated as sentences can be, a proper sentence contains two key components: *a subject* and *a predicate*.

A *subject* is like the main character of a sentence: it is the person, place, or thing that all of the action revolves around. It receives or does the action.

A *predicate* is the plot of the story and contains everything that happens to or because of the subject. In simple sentences, the predicate is the verb. For example, in the sentence below, *Bob* is the subject and sat is the predicate:

Bob sat.

All sentences have a subject and a predicate, making each sentence like a tiny story – a unit that makes sense by itself. Most sentence errors occur when this basic unit is disrupted. This handout focuses on three common sentence errors and suggests a variety of ways to correct them.

Common Sentence Error #1: Comma Splices

A comma splice occurs when a comma is used to link two independent sentence units (with their own subjects and predicates) that are fully capable of standing on their own.

Example: We always eat at In ‘N’ Out, they prefer Burger King.

In this example, both “We always eat at In ‘N’ Out” and “they prefer Burger King” are complete, independent sentences. Each makes sense on its own and includes both a subject (we, they) and a predicate (eat..., prefer...).

This common sentence error can be corrected in a variety of ways...

Option #1: Divide the splice into two separate sentences using a period.

Example: We always eat at In ‘N’ Out. They prefer Burger King.

Option #2: Connect the two spliced segments with a coordinating conjunction: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.

Example: We always eat at In ‘N’ Out, but they prefer Burger King.

Option #3: Connect the spliced sections using a semi-colon, which can join related sentences.

Example: We always eat at In ‘N’ Out; they prefer Burger King.

Option #4: Link the spliced sections with a subordinating conjunction: although, while, as, since, though, etc.

Example: Since we always eat at In ‘N’ Out, they prefer Burger King.

Example: We always eat at In ‘N’ Out although they prefer Burger King.

Common Sentence Error #2: Run-On Sentences

Run-on sentences are like comma splices, except they combine two independent sentences without any punctuation at all. Run-on sentences are an example of overcrowding – forcing two or more sentences into a slot for one.

Example: We always eat at In ‘N’ Out they prefer Burger King.

The corrections for run-on sentences and comma splices are the same. For a list of the various ways run-on sentences can be corrected, see options #1-4 above.

Common Sentence Error #3: Fragments

Fragments typically occur when an incomplete sentence is forced to stand on its own. They often begin with subordinating conjunctions (although, while, as, since, though, if, before, etc.) and leave the reader dangling. In some cases they are simply missing a subject or a predicate.

Example: Since we always eat at In ‘N’ Out.

In this example, “we always eat at In ‘N’ Out” is a complete sentence. Here, however, the addition of the word “since” makes the sentence incomplete; the reader is left wondering: “Since this, then what?”

This common sentence error can be corrected by extending the sentence to provide the missing “then what.” The original fragment can be placed at the beginning *or* end of the sentence.

Example: Since we always eat at In ‘N’ Out, we know their secret menu.

Example: We know In ‘N’ Out’s secret menu since we always eat there.

Fragments also happen when a sentence lacks either the subject or the full predicate. This often happens when sentences start with coordinating conjunctions: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so. This is fine, but the sentence still needs both the subject and the predicate.

Example: They prefer Burger King. And go there often.

In this example, “And go there often” is a fragment. There is no subject – no person, place, or thing – that does the “going.”

To correct this common sentence error, link the fragment to the previous sentence—together they express a complete thought—or add the subject to the second sentence.

Example: They prefer Burger King and go there often.

Example: They prefer Burger King. And they go there often.

Example: They prefer Burger King. They go there often.