

SENTENCE BOUNDARIES: SENTENCE FRAGMENTS AND RUN-ON SENTENCES

What does it take for a group of words to be called a sentence (or independent clause)? In order for a sentence to stand alone, it needs to include a subject (what the sentence is about) and a predicate or verb that describes what is happening to the subject. Together, the subject and verb must form a complete thought. When a sentence includes only a predicate or a subject, it is not a complete sentence and is referred to as a “sentence fragment.”

Example of a Sentence: The fish swam fast to avoid the shark.

Example of a Sentence Fragment: To avoid the shark.

Now that we know what constitutes a sentence, we can look at some common problems that occur when writers don’t observe sentence boundaries. Complete sentences must be divided from one another following a basic set of rules. A common problem occurs when a writer places two independent clauses in the same sentence without dividing them with proper punctuation. Two independent clauses within the same sentence is typically called a “run-on sentence.” A special kind of run-on sentence occurs when a writer connects two independent clauses with only a comma. This is called a “comma splice.”

Example of a Run-On Sentence: I have a dog he likes to run a lot and eat and play.

Example of a Common Splice: I have a dog, he likes to run a lot and eat and play.

So, what should a writer do with two independent clauses that are closely related? To separate two closely related independent clauses, you can use a period, a semicolon, or a comma with a coordinating conjunction.

Correct, Using a Period: I have a dog. He likes to run a lot and eat and play.

Correct, Using a Semicolon: I have a dog; he likes to run a lot and eat and play.

Correct, Using a Comma and a Coordinating Conjunction: I have a dog, and he likes to run a lot and eat and play.

Here are some basic guidelines that explain when to use a comma or semicolon when connecting independent clauses.

Connecting Independent Clauses with a Comma

1. **FANBOYS: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so**

Referred to as coordinating conjunctions, the “FANBOYS” are used to separate independent clauses and need commas before them.

Examples: My dog hates cats, **but** cats like my dog.

She explained the topic to me, **yet** I still wasn’t able to understand her.

My friends decided to come over, **so** I had to clean the house.

Connecting Independent Clauses with Semicolons

1. No connecting words.

You can use a semicolon to link two independent clauses without also using a connecting word (like the FANBOYS presented above).

Examples: It rained this afternoon; I went swimming anyway.

We always avoid big interstate highways when we take long road trips; the ride is usually more scenic on back roads.

Linda can't take the elevator; she's afraid of enclosed spaces.

2. Conjunctive Adverbs

You can use a semicolon to link two independent clauses with a following conjunctive adverb (adverbs that are used to join independent clauses, such as however, moreover, therefore, consequently, otherwise, nevertheless, thus, etc). Place the semicolon right before the conjunctive adverb and a comma right after it.

Examples: The highway traffic was horrible this morning; **however**, I was able to get to my meeting on time.

The food tasted awful; **therefore**, I sent it back to the chef.

I shrunk that shirt in the wash; **otherwise**, I would have worn it to the event today.

Additional Resources

See related handouts: "Commas and Semicolons" and "Sentence Boundaries, Commas, and Semicolons Practice Worksheet"

Sentence Boundaries: http://www.fandm.edu/uploads/media_items/sentence-boundaries.original.pdf

Commas: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/607/01/>

Semicolons: <http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/Semicolons.html>

Works Cited

"Commas: Quick Rules." Purdue OWL. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Oct. 2013.

"Commas vs. Semicolons in Compound Sentences." Purdue OWL: Commas. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Oct. 2013.

Pagaard, Timothy L. "Mechanics: Sentence Boundaries." Cuyamaca.net. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Oct. 2013.

"Run-on Sentences, Comma Splices" *Grammar.ccc.commnet.edu*. Capital Community College Foundation, n.d. Web. 17 Nov. 2013.

"Semicolons to Separate List Items." *Grammar Monster*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Nov. 2013.