

# Identifying and Fixing Run-On Sentences

Are you having problems with run-on sentences? Is Microsoft Word telling you that your beautiful gems are fragments? Are you generally interested in learning more about proper sentence structure, including sentence clauses and punctuation? This is the resource for you.<sup>1</sup>

Avoiding run-on sentences can be tricky. Sometimes a sentence contains several elements and seems impossible to split up. The meaning may be clear to you, but readers and teachers keep telling you that your long sentences are hard to follow. On the other hand, you don't want to replace a run-on sentence with a series of abrupt fragments. How should you deal with the pervasive run-on?

Generally, err on the side of caution. It's much easier to make other grammatical mistakes in long sentences. (In particular, it's easy to forget who the subject is!). Academic language doesn't mean that all your sentences must be long and saturated with genius. It means that you should write in a way that efficiently conveys ideas and arguments. Often, this is best achieved through short sentences. If you know you have problems with run-on sentences, or just want to practice ways to shorten them, this post and the ones that follow should help you.

## What is a run-on sentence?

A run-on, contrary to popular belief, is not just a super long sentence. Although many long sentences are difficult to understand, many are grammatically correct. [This link](#), shows a 239-word sentence that is entirely correct! A run-on just means that there are two clauses in the sentence that are joined without the appropriate punctuation. These can be very short: Adam is a good boy he really loves animals. They can also be long; any joining of two run-on sentences will be a longer run-on. However, long sentences are not all run-ons, though a certain length will always hinder readability.

There are two types of run-ons. The first type is the **fused sentence**, in which two independent clauses are run together (fused) without an appropriate conjunction or mark of punctuation between them. A few examples:

*"You can only be young once you can be immature forever."*

*"A wise man makes his own decisions an ignorant man follows public opinion."*

Reading fused sentences reveals two perfectly good clauses and ideas, but never sounds quite right. That's because fused sentences are missing conjunctions or punctuation!

The second type of run-on is the **comma splice**. This happens when two independent clauses are separated by a comma instead of a period or semicolon. Sometimes a comma isn't enough, and further conjunctions or punctuation is required. For example:

*"By day the goldfinches dip in yellow light, by night the frogs sing the song that never goes out of favor."*


*"The air was soggy, the season was exhausted."*

As you might hear when reading them aloud, sentences with comma splices still have good ideas and fine clauses, but they seem to be missing something. Reading "the air was soggy, and the season was exhausted" with the extra

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All examples from Grammar.com.

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conjunction just sounds more grammatical, doesn't it? The addition of the conjunction also helps the reader by linking the ideas and giving the sentence an extra pause.

### **Identifying Run-On Sentences**

Understanding the definition of a run-on sentence is only part of learning how to identify them in your own writing. Here we go over a few tactics for finding run-ons in your work.

First, try to use your intuition. If it sounds wrong, it could be. Even practicing reformulating your sentences will help internalize the run-on rules, because they are meant above all to help with clarity. Another problem with identifying run-ons is that grammar check often doesn't find them – another reason to be cautious when using longer sentences!

To identify run-ons, be sure to read the text out loud. If your voice pauses where there is no comma or conjunction, your sentence may be a fused sentence. If the comma doesn't seem quite right, but comma rules are still baffling you, you might have a comma splice and need to add in another word.

Another good way to find run-ons is to split the longer sentence up into parts. Are all the parts independent clauses? Are some of the clauses dependent or relative to (an)other clause(s)? Starting with an understanding of the relation of all the individual parts of a sentence will help you identify a run-on. Even if a fusing is grammatically correct, understanding the relation of the two clauses will help you make your meaning much clearer.

### **Fixing Run-On Sentences**

There are five basic ways to fix a run-on sentence.

- 1) Add a comma and conjunction between the two clauses
- 2) Add a semicolon between the two clauses
- 3) Separate the clauses into two sentences
- 4) Restructure sentence entirely
- 5) Delete words that may be tangling your sentence

Let's go through these corrections with the same example sentence, in order to understand how these fixes work. In addition, not all these fixes are equal – that is, each of them changes the sentence in different, nuanced ways. Let's begin with this sentence:

*His words are very powerful, his sentences bring destruction.*

Can you identify which kind of run-on sentence this is? This sentence is a comma splice because it joins two clauses without a proper conjunction. As you can tell, the two clauses here are "His words are very powerful" and also "his sentences bring destruction."

Here's how we could fix this sentence:

- 1) Add a comma and conjunction between the two clauses:  
*His words are very powerful, and his sentences bring destruction.*

- 2) Add a semicolon between the two clauses:  
*His words are very powerful; his sentences bring destruction.*

- 3) Separate the clauses into two sentences:



*His words are very powerful. His sentences bring destruction.*

4) Restructure sentence entirely:

*His words and sentences are very powerful and bring destruction.*

5) Delete words that may be tangling your sentence

As you can see, the sentence changes according to each fix. Which of these cases seems like the best to you? All the fixes give a different nuance to the sentence. For example, fix #1 is a more list-like approach, where the writer wants to express the respective qualities of “his words” and “his sentences.” On the other hand, fix #2 seems to link the clauses by showing that “his sentences” are a natural development of “his words.” While fix #3 is grammatical, it also sounds rather clipped and does not link the sentences together. Lastly, fix #4 changes the meaning of the sentence by expressing that both “his words and sentences” have both qualities of power and destruction.

Overall, all four fixes are grammatical, but some are better than others *in this context*. In other contexts, these fixes could be more or less appropriate, depending on what the writer is trying to say.

Here’s another example:

*I saw a painting at the museum it was beautiful.*

Can you tell what type of run-on sentence this is? (See below for answers)

Can you fix this sentence with each of the five different strategies? (See below for answers)

- 1) Add a comma and conjunction between the two clauses
- 2) Add a semicolon between the two clauses
- 3) Separate the clauses into two sentences
- 4) Restructure sentence entirely
- 5) Delete words that may be tangling your sentence

#### **ANSWER KEY**

This is an example of a fused sentence that joins two independent clauses without proper punctuation. Here is how it can be fixed with all five strategies:

1) Add a comma and conjunction between the two clauses  
*I saw the painting at the museum, and it was beautiful.*

2) Add a semicolon between the two clauses  
*I saw the painting at the museum; it was beautiful.*

3) Separate the clauses into two sentences  
*I saw the painting at the museum. It was beautiful.*

4) Restructure sentence entirely  
*The painting I saw at the museum was beautiful.*

5) Delete words that may be tangling your sentence.  
*I saw the beautiful painting at the museum.*

