

Commas & Comma Splices

Five Rules of Comma Usage

Know these as if your life depended on them.

1) Use a comma when you have two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction

(FANBOYS: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so).

Examples: Georgia has great peaches, but peaches host terrible parasites.
Georgia has great peaches, and peaches host terrible parasites.
Georgia has great peaches, yet peaches host terrible parasites.

2) Use a comma after an introductory phrase or clause over four words long.

Example: Although I was very tired last night, I did not go to bed until 3 a.m.

3) Use commas with dates, addresses, titles and numbers.

Examples: Monday, July 31, 1982, is my wedding anniversary.
Portland, Oregon, is much larger than Portland, Maine.

4) Use two commas when including a non-restrictive element. That is, if the information is not essential to defining who or what the subject is, set the information off with commas.

Example: Jake Holmes, my accountant, fixed my taxes this year.

Tip: You will never separate a subject from its verb with a single comma.

5) Do NOT use two commas when including a restrictive element. That is, if the information is vital to defining who or what the subject is, do not set the information off with commas.

Example: Students, who fail their exams, must forfeit their scholarships.

Correction: Students who fail their exams must forfeit their scholarships.

Definition of a comma splice (CS): a comma splice is not simply a generic comma error; if you have a comma splice error you have joined two sentences (independent clauses) with a comma. You cannot do this and be grammatically correct.

Example of a comma splice: The blue whale is the largest animal on earth, it is interesting to note that it eats the smallest animal.

Analysis of a comma splice: If a comma splice is two sentences joined with a comma, then you have to understand what a complete sentence is.

Specifically, a complete sentence must: 1) have a subject (even if implied); 2) have a verb; and 3) convey a complete thought. You can see that “The blue whale is the largest animal on earth” is a complete sentence; there is a subject, “whale,” and a verb, “is,” and it conveys a complete thought. Likewise, “it eats the smallest animal” is a complete sentence. In this case, “it” is the subject and “eats” is the verb. And again the thought is complete; this clause could stand alone.

Detection of a comma splice: Once you understand what a sentence is and what a comma splice is, you probably will begin to see your own errors fairly easily. To help detect comma splices, consider reading the last sentence of your paper first, then reading the next-to-last sentence, and so on, moving through the paper backwards. The **key** here is to look at your writing objectively and to focus on grammar rather than content or the flow of your words. Be especially watchful of long sentences (although long sentences ARE NOT necessarily wrong!); look carefully to determine if you have merged two independent clauses. Unfortunately reading aloud rarely catches comma splices since the pause of a comma and the pause of a period are essentially the same. In fact, this probably explains why we make comma splices so often--the writing sounds fine.

Correction of a comma splice: To correct a comma splice, you have to eliminate the problem of having two complete sentences, two independent clauses. You can do this in four ways:

- Use a semi-colon to join the two independent clauses.

Example: The blue whale is the largest animal on earth; however, it eats the smallest animal.

- Use a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) to make one clause dependent.

Example: The blue whale is the largest animal on earth, but it eats the smallest animal.

- Subordinate one of the independent clauses.

Example: Even though the blue whale is the largest animal on earth, it eats the smallest animal.

- Use a period to create two sentences.

Example: The blue whale is the largest animal on earth. It eats the smallest animal.

As you can see, by adding coordinating conjunctions and subordinators to eliminate a comma splice, you may actually enhance your sentence's meaning by clarifying the connection between the two ideas (in this case a contrast). Even if you seldom make comma splices, using semicolons, conjunctions, and subordinators should enhance the fluidity of your writing.

For more assistance with apostrophes, or with any stage of the writing process, stop by The Writing Center or visit www.writingcenter.txstate.edu to make an appointment.



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