

#21) Independent Clause Errors: Comma Splices and Fused Sentences

The purpose of this handout is to help you understand the proper techniques for linking independent clauses. The handout first identifies the common errors—comma splices, fused sentences, and run-on sentences— associated with linking independent clauses and then demonstrates the five most common techniques for correcting these errors. The handout also includes an exercise to help you practice the techniques.

Comma Splice

The term *comma splice* refers to the linking of two independent clauses with a comma. An independent clause is a construction with a subject and predicate, one that could stand alone as a complete thought. Two independent clauses may not be linked by a comma only. The following is an example of a comma-spliced sentence:

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 in our writing when we sense a relationship between two ideas. In the example above, the relationship is one of cause and result—the rise in obesity has caused many parents to monitor what their kids eat (the result). But the comma alone is not the correct way to link two ideas each expressed in an independent clause. The “Strategies” section below discusses correct methods.

While proofreading your own 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 see 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.

In this case, clearly each sentence is an independent clause with a subject and predicate, a complete thought. Therefore, the independent clauses may not be linked with a comma alone. After discussing *fused sentences*, which immediately follows, we’ll examine the ways to correct a *comma splice*.

Fused Sentence

The term *fused sentence* describes two or more independent clauses run together with no punctuation or coordinating conjunction. Some handbooks call this a *run-on sentence*, but the *St. Martin’s Handbook*, used by composition students at the University of Arkansas, makes no distinction between these terms, so we’ll do the same. The following is an example of 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.”

Just as with the comma splice, we often mistakenly construct fused sentences when we sense a close logical relationship between two ideas. In the example above, the relationship is one of similarity. The writer wants to add a second idea similar to the first. The first idea is that Paine advocated a break with a corrupt institution, in this case, King George’s

English monarchy. The second idea is very similar to the first. Paine denounced institutions of organized religion due to their tendency, in his opinion, to frighten and subjugate. However, the example has two independent clauses run together with neither punctuation nor a conjunction.

Similarly, this error can occur when we include the conjunction but forget the punctuation:

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.”

In both cases, we can confirm that we have two independent clauses by examining whether each idea in the example above could stand alone as a 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.”

Indeed, each can stand alone as a sentence. Therefore, we have two independent clauses with no punctuation or conjunction—a *fused sentence*. In the next section we will examine strategies for correcting comma splices and fused sentences.

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*).

If you choose to link two independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction, be sure to select the conjunction that accurately expresses the relationship between the two clauses. For example, *and* indicates that the linked ideas are equally important; *but* indicates that the linked ideas contrast.

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) and then a comma to link the clauses.**

If you choose to link two independent clauses with a conjunctive adverb, be sure to select an adverb that accurately expresses the relationship between the two clauses. For example, *consequently* indicates that the second idea is a result of the first; *however* indicates that the second idea contrasts the first. *For a more complete listing of conjunctive adverbs, see page 591 of the *St. Martin's Handbook*.

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)**

If you choose to link two independent clauses by subordinating one of the clauses, be sure to select a subordinating conjunction that accurately expresses the relationship between the two clauses. For example, *although* indicates that the subordinate idea contrasts the idea expressed in the independent clause; *because* indicates that the subordinate idea is the cause of the idea expressed in the independent clause. *For a more complete listing of subordinate conjunctions, see page 590 of the *St. Martin's Handbook*.

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. You may encounter these types of constructions in print. Good writers who use them have consciously chosen these constructions and have carefully considered the effect these nonstandard constructions will have upon their audience.

Beginning writers may use these constructions inadvertently without understanding their impact. 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, then you will be able to consider using nonstandard punctuation for a particular reason. But beware: you must first demonstrate to your composition instructors that you know how to correctly join independent clauses before you can consider altering the rules for effect.

Exercise: In the following paragraph, there are five independent clause errors. Correct each one.

Paine thought the barbarities of the Old Testament inconsistent with what he deemed the real character of God he believed that murder, massacre and indiscriminate slaughter had never been commanded by the Deity. He regarded much of the Bible as childish, unimportant and foolish. The scientific world entertains the same opinion. Paine attacked the Bible precisely in the same spirit in which he had attacked the pretensions of kings and he used the same weapons. All the pomp in the world could not make him cower, his reason knew no "Holy of Holies," except the abode of Truth. The sciences were then in their infancy the attention of the really learned had not been directed to an impartial examination of our pretended revelation. It was accepted by most as a matter of course. The church was all-powerful, and no one, unless thoroughly imbued with the spirit of self-sacrifice, thought for a moment of disputing the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. The infamous doctrines that salvation depends upon belief – upon a mere intellectual conviction – was then believed and preached. To doubt was to secure the damnation of your soul. This absurd and devilish doctrine shocked the common sense of Thomas Paine he denounced it with the fervor of honest indignation.

Independent Clause Errors Exercise: Answer Key

Paine thought the barbarities of the Old Testament inconsistent with what he deemed the real character of **God. He** believed that murder, massacre and indiscriminate slaughter had never been commanded by the Deity. He regarded much of the Bible as childish, unimportant and foolish. The scientific world entertains the same opinion. Paine attacked the Bible precisely in the same spirit in which he had attacked the pretensions of **kings. He** used the same weapons. All the pomp in the world could not make him **cower. His** reason knew no "Holy of Holies," except the abode of Truth. The sciences were then in their **infancy. The attention** of the really learned had not been directed to an impartial examination of our pretended revelation. It was accepted by most as a matter of course. The church was all-powerful, and no one, unless thoroughly imbued with the spirit of self-sacrifice, thought for a moment of disputing the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. The infamous doctrines that salvation depends upon belief – upon a mere intellectual conviction – was then believed and preached. To doubt was to secure the damnation of your soul. This absurd and devilish doctrine shocked the common sense of Thomas **Paine, and he** denounced it with the fervor of honest indignation.

(Thanks to the Thomas Paine National Historical Society for the excerpt above. For full text of the biography by Robert G. Ingersoll (1870), visit <<http://www.thomaspaine.org/bio/ingersoll1870.html>>.