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## Sentence Boundaries

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Many student writers struggle with sentence boundaries and are prone to fragments, run-ons, and convoluted prose. This handout will address basic sentence structure and common errors. It is also important to have a feeling for the *limits* of a sentence; you may have constructed a sentence that is technically correct, but if it's unnecessarily long and complex, the reader will struggle to understand its meaning.

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### Rules for Correct Semi-Colon Usage

To be grammatically correct, a sentence must contain both a **subject**, which identifies what the sentence is about, and **predicate**, which says or asks something about the subject or tells the subject to do something.

A **clause** is a group of words containing a subject and a predicate. **Independent clauses** can stand alone as complete sentences: *The dog is hungry*. **Dependent clauses** cannot stand alone; they must be linked to an independent clause: *The dog is hungry*, *so we'd better feed it*.

INDEPENDENT                      DEPENDENT

There are four types of sentences. Once you understand the different ways a sentence can be constructed, you can analyze your own writing and improve it by varying your sentence patterns.

1. **Simple sentences** consist of one independent clause and no dependent clause.

*The yard is surrounded by a white picket fence.*

*The bicycles and skateboards are stored in the small shed.*

*At practice, the coach and her assistant run drills and review strategies.*

2. **Compound sentences** consist of two or more independent clauses and no dependent clauses. The clauses must be joined by either a comma and coordinating conjunction or by a semi-colon.

*Sometimes I ignore my alarm clock, and I have to rush to get to class.*

*James is obsessed with baseball; he eats, breathes, and lives the game.*

3. **Complex sentences** consist of one independent clause and at least one dependent clause.

*Many students think that grammar is tricky.*

DEPENDENT →↑

*Those who are afraid of heights should not climb the Eiffel Tower.*

DEPENDENT →↑

*As I waited in line, I stood beside another customer who complained loudly about the wait.*

DEPENDENT →↑

DEPENDENT →↑

4. **Compound-complex sentences** consist of two or more independent clauses and at least one dependent clause.

*I complimented Joe when he finished the job, and he seemed pleased.*

INDEPENDENT → DEPENDENT → INDEPENDENT →

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## Sentence Boundary Errors

### Fragments

A sentence fragment is an incomplete sentence. Although fragments are commonly used in conversation and even in some informal forms of writing, they are not appropriate in academic writing. They confuse the meaning of your sentence, are distracting to readers, and will be regarded as errors. To correct your fragments, you can combine them with nearby independent clauses, or add more words to make them a complete sentence.

#### Examples:

- NBC will broadcast the debates. With discussions afterwards. → NBC will broadcast the debates, with discussions afterwards.
- Jane didn't return to work for three weeks after her surgery. → Jane didn't return to work for three weeks after surgery. She wanted to let her knee fully heal.
- William Shakespeare wrote many plays. Such as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. → William Shakespeare wrote many plays, such as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*.
- Being more productive. That was one of my New Year's resolutions. → Being more productive was one of my New Year's resolutions.

### Run-Ons and Comma Splices

A **run-on or fused sentence** results from joining two or more independent clauses **without** using proper punctuation or connecting words. A **comma splice** occurs with independent clauses are separated only by a comma. The easiest way to correct fused sentences and comma splices is to separate them into two sentences.

#### Examples:

- My mother likes to work in the garden she grows beautiful sunflowers. → My mother likes to work in the garden. She grows beautiful sunflowers.
- John hikes a different section of the Appalachian Trail every year, it's his favorite way to spend summer break. → John hikes a different section of the Appalachian Trail every year. It's his favorite way to spend summer break.



If the ideas in the two clauses are closely related, you can join them with a comma and a coordinating conjunction or with a semi-colon.

- I woke up with a headache, I took some aspirin. → I woke up with a headache, so I took some aspirin.
- I need to pay my tuition I don't have enough money. → I need to pay my tuition, but I don't have enough money.

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### **Style and Sentence Boundaries**

Learning how to correctly combine independent clauses is important because short sentences are often considered “choppy” and undesirable in academic contexts. However, an overly long and complex sentence, even if it is technically correct, may make it hard for a reader to follow your meaning. If you find that your sentences continue for multiple lines on the page and frequently contain compound subjects and/or predicates, consider separating the independent clauses to enhance the clarity of your writing.

Read the following grammatically correct sentence, and consider how you might break it up:

When considering which college to attend, it is important to identify which elements of a college education are most important to you, then conduct a widespread search of all institutions that fit those criteria, and finally narrow the list down to an appropriate number of schools, including reach and safety choices, so that you can be confident in the knowledge that, no matter which college you end up attending, you have considered all of the options available to you and haven't overlooked any schools that may have been a great fit.

If you find that your sentences have many commas, colons, or semicolons, or that you've tacked on several dependent clauses beginning with “who”, “which”, or “that”, identify the main points and separate them out into multiple sentences. This process may also reveal redundancies in your writing. Try breaking up these sentences as well:

James, who didn't complete his homework, which was due that morning, as required by the teacher, arrived late to class, which was against the school's rules, and went noisily to his seat, slamming his bag on his desk, which he had defiled with permanent marker, and refusing to take out his textbook or his binder, which should have contained his completed homework, but didn't because he hadn't done it, an offense for which he was about to receive detention.

