

Comma Splices

A Skill Sheet

The comma splice is one of the most common errors in student writing. Specifically, a comma splice occurs when a writer uses a comma to “splice” together two independent thoughts that 1) **should be joined together with a word or some other punctuation mark**, or 2) **should be separated by some other form of punctuation**. Some examples follow.

Example One

Comma Splice: I went to the store, I saw a man standing on the corner.
Correct Sentences: I went to the store. I saw a man standing on the corner.
Correct Sentence: I went to the store, and I saw a man standing on the corner.

Example Two

Comma Splice: Dogs have large canine teeth, mice have large molars.
Correct Sentences: Dogs have large canine teeth. Mice have large molars.
Correct Sentence: Dogs have large canine teeth, but mice have large molars.

Example Three

Comma Splice: My grandmother lives in the country, her house is very big.
Corrected Sentences: My grandmother lives in the country. Her house is very big.
Corrected Sentence: My grandmother lives in the country, and her house is very big.

Example Four

Comma Splice: It takes five apples to make an apple pie, it takes ten to make applesauce.
Corrected Sentences: It takes five apples to make an apple pie. It takes ten to make applesauce.
Corrected Sentence: It takes five apples to make an apple pie, and it takes ten to make applesauce.
Corrected Sentence: It takes five apples to make an apple pie, but it takes ten to make applesauce.

As you can see, fixing a comma splice can be as simple as replacing the comma with a period (and then capitalizing the first letter of the second sentence, of course!). Comma splices can sometimes be eliminated by adding various punctuation marks, and certain specific types of words. Before discussing the solutions, however, we must first examine the problem itself.

Explanation of The Problem:

There are only three reasons why a writer would ever create a comma splice.

1. The writer *may simply be unaware* that different thoughts occur in different sentences.
2. The writer *may be aware* that different thoughts belong in separate sentences, *but may be unable* to differentiate between such thoughts.
3. The writer *may be aware* that different thoughts belong in separate sentences, *is able* to differentiate between such thoughts, *but feels compelled to join them with a comma despite the previously stated rules*.

The first reason - in which the writer is unaware that different thoughts must occur in different sentences - is rarely an issue. Such cases are characteristic of very young children who haven't had very much practice in writing.

The second reason - in which the writer is unable to differentiate between separate independent clauses - is surprisingly even less common. Almost all native speakers of any language can identify independent thoughts or clauses. Given a string of sentences strung together with no punctuation at all, nearly anyone can identify the different thoughts conveyed. Read the following "sentence" and see if you can identify which groups of words make up separate sentences.

I went to the store on my way I saw a man standing on the corner.

If you are a native speaker of English, chances are you would have divided the above example into two distinct sentences, like this:

I went to the store.

On my way I saw a man standing on the corner.

Furthermore, the fact that some native speakers place commas in places where there should be periods proves that they are entirely capable of distinguishing between different thoughts. However, many people still feel that they must take separate groups of words and join them together with commas, as in the example below.

I went to the store, on my way I saw a man standing on the corner.

The majority of people who create comma splices in their writing fall into this third category. They know that the thoughts they are writing should be separated, but they still choose to use commas instead of periods (or some other form of end-mark punctuation) in their sentences. Why does this happen? It happens because, as stated earlier, people

feel compelled to join separate thoughts together. This feeling of compulsion stems from the fact that the two thoughts being conveyed, however separate and distinct, are extremely similar and related. In the above example we might have just as easily written,

“I went to the store and I saw a man standing on the corner,”

or...

“On my way to the store I saw a man standing on the corner.”

Notice that in both of the above examples, an event (seeing the man on the corner) occurred *while* “I” was going to the store. Because of the proximity or closeness of these two separate events, writers often feel compelled to put them in the same sentence, thus creating a comma splice. It is important to realize that although such an action is without question an error, it is an error with significant and valid logic behind it. Most writers already know that distinct thoughts should be separated from one another; they simply don’t agree that a full-fledged period is the proper way to separate them. And, strangely enough, they’re right...

How to Fix It:

As we have already seen, comma splices occur because writers feel compelled to *join* similar or related thoughts with a comma rather than *separate* them with a period. It makes sense; commas, as most of us remember being taught, are used to denote a pause, and periods are used to end sentences. If “I” is going to the store and, *in the process of getting there* sees a man standing on the corner, why should we try to separate these two inseparable events?

One answer is to not separate them at all. What most people don’t realize is that a comma splice is often a sign of syntactic and linguistic growth. Comma splices are signs that a particular writer is trying to achieve a more advanced form of written expression, and that that he or she does not yet possess the linguistic skills to do so. One solution to the comma splice, then, is not simply to eliminate it by changing the comma to a period, but to 1) make use of a more advanced form of punctuation, or to 2) make use of something called a *coordinating conjunction*.

Using a Coordinating Conjunction or a Subordinating Conjunction to Correct a Comma Splice

A coordinating conjunction is a word that joins two complete, independent thoughts. It is a *conjunction* in that it joins the two thoughts, and it is *coordinating* in that it puts the two

thoughts on equal terms with one another. In simplest terms, *a coordinating conjunction is a word that joins two equally important sentences together.*

There are seven coordinating conjunctions. They are *and, but, or, nor, for, yet, and so*. Any one of them can be inserted **after** a comma splice to correct the sentence. Consider again the sentences contained in **Example One** from the beginning of this lesson.

Example One

Comma Splice: *I went to the store, I saw a man standing on the corner.*
 Correct Sentences: *I went to the store. I saw a man standing on the corner.*
 Correct Sentence: *I went to the store, and I saw a man standing on the corner.*

The sentence “I went to the store, I saw a man standing on the corner” contains a comma splice. The easiest way to fix the sentence would be to replace the comma with a period, but the coordinating conjunction *and* does the job as well. The other coordinating conjunctions (*but, or, nor, yet, and so*) make the sentence make sense grammatically, but they contort the meaning of the sentence. Each coordinating conjunction has its own unique purpose and effect, as demonstrated in the following examples.

Comma Splice:	It was raining, I decided to go anyway.
Corrected Sentence:	It was raining, but I decided to go anyway.
Comma Splice:	There was only one left, I left it for you.
Corrected Sentence:	There was only one left, so I left it for you.
Comma Splice:	She wouldn't sing, she wouldn't play the guitar.
Corrected Sentence:	She wouldn't sing, nor would she play the guitar.
Comma Splice:	The cat walked quietly, it was stalking the mouse.
Corrected Sentence:	The cat walked quietly, for it was stalking the mouse.
Comma Splice:	I felt the anger rise within me, I held my temper.
Corrected Sentence:	I felt the anger rise within me, yet I held my temper
Comma Splice:	You may stay, you may go.
Corrected Sentence:	You may stay, or you may go.

When using a coordinating conjunction to eliminate a comma splice, then, the writer must consider how the conjunction will affect the meaning of the sentence which contains it.

Using a Semicolon to Correct a Comma Splice

Semicolons can often be used as the cure for the comma splice and, for many writers, can provide the linguistic technology necessary for heightened control over tone and meaning in a given sentence. Semicolons differ from all other forms of punctuation in that **they are used to subordinate one complete thought to another**. In other words, **semicolons may be used to show the relationship between two distinct but inseparable thoughts**. Often this relationship is one of cause and effect, as seen in the examples below.

Example One

Comma Splice: I knew I had to go, it was the only way to keep everyone happy.

Corrected Sentence: I knew I had to go; it was the only way to keep everyone happy.

Example Two

Comma Splice: People used to confuse the two of them all the time, it was inevitable, since their names were so similarly spelled.

Corrected Sentence: People used to confuse the two of them all the time; it was inevitable, since their names were so similarly spelled.

Example Three

Comma Splice: We had to move the piano first, how else could we get at the electrical outlet?

Corrected Sentence: We had to move the piano first; how else could we get at the electrical outlet?

Notice that all three of the examples above have complete, independent sentences on either side of the semicolon, which might lead a writer to separate them with a period. Because the two thoughts are so closely related a semicolon is perfectly acceptable and, in fact, helps to communicate the relationship between the two thoughts.

Semicolons can also be used to link two related ideas that don't involve cause and effect. There is no specific rule that might describe the relationship between two such thoughts. It is sufficient to say that they are closely related, and that **the purpose** of the second thought **is to expound or comment on the first thought**. Consider the examples below.

Example One

Comma Splice: She wanted to go, she had nothing else to do.

Corrected Sentence: She wanted to go; she had nothing else to do.

Example Two

Comma Splice: The answer involved solving a word problem, she dreaded the thought of it.

Corrected Sentence: The answer involved solving a word problem; she dreaded the thought of it.

Example Three

Comma Splice: There was plenty of food in the cabinets, if he had only taken the time to look he would have found it.

Corrected Sentence: There was plenty of food in the cabinets; if he had only taken the time to look he would have found it.

Example Four

Comma Splice: The horses stood solidly in the field during the storm, there was so much snow on their backs they looked like marble statues.

Corrected Sentence: The horses stood solidly in the field during the storm; there was so much snow on their backs that they looked like marble statues.

Example Five

Comma Splice: Throughout the night the boys were kept awake by the sound of cats fighting in the alley, the howling of the wind was not enough to muffle the sound.

Corrected Sentence: Throughout the night the boys were kept awake by the sound of cats fighting in the alley; the howling of the wind was not enough to muffle the sound.

Note the closeness of the pairs of thoughts in the examples above. They are so closely related that it is not uncommon for writers to put a comma in place of the semicolon. Such an act, of course, would be considered a comma splice, and is undesirable. Also, many writers choose to use a period instead of a semicolon; it makes sense to do so, considering that both periods and semicolons are used to separate independent, distinct thoughts. While periods are perfectly legitimate, however, **a semicolon can tie the two thoughts more closely together**. In addition, **a semicolon has the effect of making the pause between the two thoughts seem more subtle and less pronounced**, which of course **alters the tone** of the overall sentence.

Comma Splices:
Exercises

Part One

Directions: Use *a period* to eliminate the following comma splices.

1. He took a walk, he saw a movie.

2. John took a walk, he saw a movie.

3. The dog caught the ball, she barked and ran away with it.

4. The glass is empty, it is sitting next to the sink.

5. The ink is blue, it is starting to smudge.

* * *

Part Two

Directions: Use a *coordinating conjunction* to eliminate the following comma splices.

6. He was tired, he went to bed.

7. I ran down the stairs, they were at the door.

8. She tried as hard as she could, she didn't try hard enough.

9. He took a walk, he saw a movie.

10. The tree house was nestled in the oak tree, no one could see it.

11. I have too much to do, I can't go with you.

12. The dog caught the ball, she barked and ran away with it.

13. She had a lot of money, she decided to save it.

14. She had a lot of money, she decided to spend it.

15. We went inside quickly, it started to rain.

* * *

Part Three**Directions:** Use *a period* to eliminate the following comma splices.

16. She likes buttercups, roses, and tulips, she hates daisies.

17. He saw his three friends yesterday, Dan, John, and Jake came over to play again today.

18. Pizza is best with mushrooms, peppers, and pepperoni, onions, broccoli, and bacon and are gross.

19. Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving are my favorite holidays, that's when my family comes to visit.

20. The building was made of brick, mortar, and wood, it could withstand very strong winds.

* * *

Part Four

Directions: Use a *coordinating conjunction* to eliminate the following comma splices.

21. She likes buttercups, roses, and tulips, she hates daisies.

22. He saw his three friends yesterday, Dan, John, and Jake came over to play again today.

23. Pizza is best with mushrooms, peppers, and pepperoni, onions, broccoli, and bacon and are gross.

24. Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving are my favorite holidays, that's when my family comes to visit.

25. The building was made of brick, mortar, and wood, it could withstand very strong winds.

* * *

Part Five

Directions: Use *a semicolon* to eliminate the following comma splices.

26. The papers were perfect, there would be no need for revisions.

27. My father's favorite shirt was still in the wash, he would not be going anywhere.

28. The sheep were still in the pasture, the dog would have to go get them.

30. The engine was overheated, we would have to walk back to town.

31. The cat had no choice but to drop the mouse, the tiny creature had sunk its teeth into its attacker's cheek!

-
-
32. The captain turned the ship around sharply, if he hadn't done so, he would have run into the rocks.
-
-

33. My sister began to smile, her dream had just come true.
-
-

34. Without missing a beat, the drummer's rhythm faltered, a spider had just crawled across the cymbal.
-
-

* * *

Solutions to *Comma Splice* Exercises

Part One: Solutions

1. He took a walk. He saw a movie.
2. John took a walk. He saw a movie.
3. The dog caught the ball. She barked and ran away with it.
4. The glass is empty. It is sitting next to the sink.
5. The ink is blue. It is starting to smudge.

Part Two: Solutions (Answers may vary slightly.)

6. He was tired, so he went to bed.
7. I ran down the stairs, for they were at the door.
8. She tried as hard as she could, but she didn't try hard enough.
9. He took a walk, and he saw a movie.
10. The tree house was nestled in the oak tree, so no one could see it.
11. I have too much to do, so I can't go with you.
12. The dog caught the ball, and she barked and ran away with it.
13. She had a lot of money, but she decided to save it.
14. She had a lot of money, so she decided to spend it.
15. We went inside quickly, for it was starting to rain.

Part Three: Solutions

16. She likes buttercups, roses, and tulips. She hates daisies.
17. He saw his three friends yesterday. Dan, John, and Jake came over to play again today.
18. Pizza is best with mushrooms, peppers, and pepperoni. Onions, broccoli, and bacon are gross.
19. Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving are my favorite holidays. That's when my family comes to visit.
20. The building was made of brick, mortar, and wood. It could withstand very strong winds.

Part Four: Solutions

21. She likes buttercups, roses, and tulips, yet she hates daisies.
22. He saw his three friends yesterday, yet Dan, John, and Jake came over to play again today.
23. Pizza is best with mushrooms, peppers, and pepperoni, but onions, broccoli, and bacon are gross.
24. Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving are my favorite holidays, for that's when my family comes to visit.
25. The building was made of brick, mortar, and wood, so it could withstand very strong winds.

Part Five: Solutions

26. The papers were perfect; there would be no need for revisions.
27. My father's favorite shirt was still in the wash; he would not be going anywhere.
28. The sheep were still in the pasture; the dog would have to go get them.
30. The engine was overheated; we would have to walk back to town.
31. The cat had no choice but to drop the mouse; the tiny creature had sunk its teeth into its attacker's cheek!
32. The captain turned the ship around sharply; if he hadn't done so, he would have run into the rocks.
33. My sister began to smile; her dream had just come true.
34. Without missing a beat, the drummer's rhythm faltered; a spider had just crawled across the cymbal.

Part Six: Solutions

(*Note* Exercises 35-36 have multiple answers. Although we've provided the most common solutions to each, the subjective nature of the semicolon may produce varied answers that are not listed. Therefore, we recommend that students study *all* the answers provided in order to ensure a thorough understanding of how semicolons may be used to correct comma splices.)

35. At night the owls came out to chant, and the crickets sang their song of glee. Moths fluttered in the windows, drawn to the light of the cheery house. In the pond, a frog croaked. In the yard, a mouse rustled its way through a pile of leaves. Soon all the sounds of night were out in force, and the moon was shining down brightly on it all.

At night the owls came out to chant, and the crickets sang their song of glee. Moths fluttered in the windows, drawn to the light of the cheery house. In the

pond, a frog croaked; in the yard, a mouse rustled its way through a pile of leaves. Soon all the sounds of night were out in force, and the moon was shining down brightly on it all.

36. No one could ever have guessed what happened next. The bird flew off her perch in a fury of feathers. She knocked open the door to her cage and flew out, barreling across the open space of the room, heading straight for the wall. She swerved just in time to avoid it, and flapped awkwardly onto the floor no more than an inch in front of the sleeping cat's nose. The cat's eyes widened in surprise. Then the bird flapped her wings again, and the terrified feline jumped two feet straight up in the air with a sudden "MeeOOOWW!" and scrambled under the couch.

No one could ever have guessed what happened next. The bird flew off her perch in a fury of feathers. She knocked open the door to her cage and flew out, barreling across the open space of the room, heading straight for the wall. She swerved just in time to avoid it, and flapped awkwardly onto the floor no more than an inch in front of the sleeping cat's nose. The cat's eyes widened in surprise; then the bird flapped her wings again, and the terrified feline jumped two feet straight up in the air with a sudden "MeeOOOWW!" and scrambled under the couch.

37. The city was bustling with people; cars honked their horns, busses roared through the streets, and shoppers hurried along the sidewalks. On one corner stood a man selling newspapers; he was wearing a bright blue sweater and a cap. He had a bushy moustache that stuck out further than the tip of his nose, and a pair of eyebrows that were deeper than a shag carpet. His hands were in mittens; it was very cold.

The city was bustling with people; cars honked their horns, busses roared through the streets, and shoppers hurried along the sidewalks. On one corner stood a man selling newspapers. He was wearing a bright blue sweater and a cap. He had a bushy moustache that stuck out further than the tip of his nose, and a pair of eyebrows that were deeper than a shag carpet. His hands were in mittens; it was very cold.

The city was bustling with people. Cars honked their horns, busses roared through the streets, and shoppers hurried along the sidewalks. On one corner stood a man selling newspapers; he was wearing a bright blue sweater and a cap. He had a bushy moustache that stuck out further than the tip of his nose, and a pair of eyebrows that were deeper than a shag carpet. His hands were in mittens; it was very cold.

The city was bustling with people. Cars honked their horns, busses roared through the streets, and shoppers hurried along the sidewalks. On one corner

stood a man selling newspapers. He was wearing a bright blue sweater and a cap. He had a bushy moustache that stuck out further than the tip of his nose, and a pair of eyebrows that were deeper than a shag carpet. His hands were in mittens; it was very cold.

The city was bustling with people. Cars honked their horns, busses roared through the streets, and shoppers hurried along the sidewalks. On one corner stood a man selling newspapers. He was wearing a bright blue sweater and a cap. He had a bushy moustache that stuck out further than the tip of his nose, and a pair of eyebrows that were deeper than a shag carpet. His hands were in mittens, for it was very cold.

The city was bustling with people. Cars honked their horns, busses roared through the streets, and shoppers hurried along the sidewalks. On one corner stood a man selling newspapers. He was wearing a bright blue sweater and a cap. He had a bushy moustache that stuck out further than the tip of his nose, and a pair of eyebrows that were deeper than a shag carpet. His hands were in mittens. It was very cold.