

THE INFAMOUS COMMA SPLICE AND HOW TO AVOID IT

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WHAT IS IT?

The error known as a comma splice occurs when two *independent* clauses are joined, with only a comma to separate them.

Example: The island is covered in berries, birds and bears love it.

Each of these clauses can stand on its own. Using only a comma between them can cause confusion, forcing the reader to re-read the sentence to make sense of it. (For a second there we thought the island was covered in berries, birds and bears.)

BUT WHAT IS A CLAUSE?

To be able to recognize the comma splice, it is necessary to understand what makes up a clause. A group of words containing a subject and a verb is a clause. **Example:** *The bridge collapsed.* Bridge is the subject. Collapsed is the verb. There are two kinds of clauses. An independent clause is one that makes complete sense on its own. It can stand alone, as a sentence, as both parts of the first example can. A dependent clause, as its name suggests, cannot stand alone as a sentence; it depends on another clause to make complete sense.

HOW DO I FIX THE COMMA SPLICE?

There are four ways to make the above sentence correct and easier to understand.

1) One solution is to use a semi-colon. A semi-colon can be used between two independent clauses when they are *closely related* to each other.

Example: The island is covered in berries; birds and bears love it.

2) Another way to correct a comma splice is to make the run-on sentence into two short sentences, using a period.

Example: The island is covered in berries. Birds and bears love it.

Making two sentences is not only correct, it may be the best way to correct the comma splice if the ideas expressed in the two main clauses are only loosely related.

Example:

Comma Splice (CS): The blockade continued for several weeks, the media helped to cloud the issues.

Revised: The blockade continued for several weeks. The media helped to cloud the issues.

3) Another way to avoid the comma splice is to use a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet) between the two clauses.

Example: The island is covered in berries, so birds and bears love it.

4) If you want to show a relationship between the two clauses, you can put one idea in a dependent clause. (Remember, a dependent clause depends on your main clause for meaning.)

Example: Because the island is covered in berries, birds and bears love it.

Notice that the first part of the sentence cannot stand alone now. The meaning of your sentence can change, depending on the word(s) you choose to bring the two clauses together.

Example:

CS: I am taking a history course, Mr. Bridges is teaching it.

Revised: I am taking a history course, if Mr. Bridges is teaching it.

Revised: I am taking a history course, even though Mr. Bridges is teaching it.

MORE EXAMPLES OF COMMA SPLICES AND WAYS TO FIX THEM:

CS: Margaret and Rajit were more than close friends, they were inseparable.

Revised: Margaret and Rajit were more than close friends; they were inseparable.

CS: There were newly emerging states, however they were still dependent on their former imperialist power.

Revised: There were newly emerging states. However, they were still dependent on their former imperialist power.

Or: There were newly emerging states; however, they were still dependent on their former imperialist power.

CS: Margaret Laurence used the town of Neepawa as a setting for many of her stories, she called it Manawaka.

Revised: Margaret Laurence used the town of Neepawa as a setting for many of her stories, but she called it Manawaka.

CS: Registration is easy, you can do it by phone.

Revised: Registration is easy; you can do it by phone.

CS: Louis Riel led the Metis rebellion in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, he has been called a hero and a madman.

Revised: Louis Riel led the Metis rebellion in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. He has been called a hero and a madman.

The Writing Centre at the University of the Fraser Valley

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