

Fragments and Run-ons

Making Sense of a Sentence



They're a worst nightmare for students and teachers, making essays choppy, hard to follow, or downright incomprehensible. They're a pain to correct, and they often have to be completely rewritten to be fixed. Of all the challenges students face in writing, sentence fragments and run-on sentences cause some of the worst frustration.

What They Are

In simplest terms, a **sentence fragment** is an incomplete sentence. A **run-on sentence** is multiple sentences mashed together without punctuation or connecting words. Fragments and run-ons are a concern in essays; fragments leave readers without enough information to understand the ideas presented, and run-ons don't provide readers with the punctuation needed to keep them from getting lost in the words and ideas. In both cases, the reader of the sentence is left lacking things that are critical to understanding the sentence being read.

The best way to avoid run-on sentences and sentence fragments is to understand how sentences are put together – what is often referred to as sentence structure, or **syntax**.

The Building Blocks of Sentences

All sentences are built from groups of words known as **clauses**. Some sentences may just be a single clause; others may be made from several connected clauses. A clause is *always* made from two parts: a **subject** and a **verb**.

A sample clause:

The fox jumps over the dog.

As you look at this clause, you'll notice two main parts that make it work. First is the subject (who or what is doing the action, the fox in this case) and the verb (the action itself, jumping in this clause).

Don't fall prey to a common misconception about subjects. Many people think the subject is "what the sentence is about." This is not an especially accurate description; the sentence is "about" everything that appears in it. The subject is actually the person, place, thing, or idea that is responsible for the action in the clause. If we took the fox out of this and just wrote "jumps over the dog," we'd be left without a subject (which means we'd no longer have a clause, but just a phrase).

Another common misconception that can wreak havoc on clauses is the idea that words ending in "-ing" are verbs. *They are not*. An "-ing" word by itself cannot function as a verb. Suppose, for example, we change our previous clause to this:

The fox jumping over the dog.

We no longer have a clause. Because the word “jumps” has been changed to “jumping,” it is no longer telling of an action but simply describing the fox. The entire group of words is now just part of the subject. To make it complete, we need to add a verb. With “-ing” words, the simplest verb is usually some form of “be.” For example:

The fox is jumping over the dog.

This is now complete because we have added a state of being, which can serve as the action in the clause.

There are two kinds of clauses, one that can stand on its own as a sentence and one that can't. *Both* kinds of clauses must have a subject and a verb.

Independent Clauses

A clause that can function as a sentence without any help from other clauses is an **independent clause**. Let's look at our previous example:

The fox jumps over the dog.

This is an independent clause. It has a subject (fox) and a verb (jumps), and there are no words in it that cause it to need help (like “if” or “because”). Because it is independent, it is also a sentence.

Dependent Clauses

If a clause can't be a sentence without being connected to an independent clause, it is a **dependent clause** (or **subordinate clause**). Here's our example written as a dependent clause:

If the fox jumps over the dog

Notice that the only change we've made is the addition of the word “if.” Everything else is exactly the same. The clause still has the same subject and verb. Because we've added “if,” though, it no longer works by itself as a sentence. A dependent clause is a fragment unless it gets connected to an independent clause. For example:

If the fox jumps over the dog, the dog will wake up.

The dog will wake up if the fox jumps over it.

All sentences are made from various clauses or combinations of clauses. Most fragments and run-ons are a result of missing or incorrectly joined clauses.

Fixing Sentence Fragments

Remember that sentence fragments are not “sentences that are too short.” The length of a sentence has nothing to do with its completeness (“Jesus wept” is not a fragment, and it's only two words). If you get a paper back and one of your sentences is marked as a fragment, look for three possible causes:

- Missing subject
- Missing verb
- Un-joined dependent clause

If you can figure out which of these three things is making your sentence a fragment, fixing it will be much easier for you.

Missing subject

In the case of a missing subject, remember that a subject will usually be a noun or a pronoun. Here's our fox and dog, written as a fragment:

Jumps over the dog.

We're missing a subject. People often mistakenly think a fragment is just a "sentence that's too short," and try to add words to pad it out and hope their instructor calls it a sentence. That leads to things like this:

- *Jumps over the lazy dog.* (Still incorrect because it just adds an adjective but no subject).
- *Jumps over the lazy dog in the yard.* (Still incorrect because it adds a prepositional phrase but no subject).
- *Jumps quickly over the lazy dog in the yard.* (Still incorrect because it adds an adverb but no subject).
- *Jumps quickly in the air over the lazy dog in the yard.* (Still incorrect because we're still just tacking on prepositional phrases).
- *Jumping quickly in the air over the lazy dog in the yard.* (Still incorrect because it took out the verb – remember that "-ing" words are not verbs – and did not add a subject).
- *Jumps quickly in the air over the lazy dog in the yard and runs away.* (Still incorrect because it adds another verb but no subject).

In this case, the *only* thing we can add to this to complete it is a subject – a noun or pronoun responsible for the action of jumping. Hence:

The fox jumps over the dog. (Correct because it now has a subject).

Missing verb

By the same token, if a fragment has a subject and no verb, it is still incomplete. Suppose we took out the verb and left just the subject:

The fox

That's also incomplete. We can add adjectives and prepositions all day long, but they will never make it complete.

- *The quick fox* (still incorrect because it adds an adjective but no verb)
- *The quick fox in the woods* (still incorrect because it adds a prepositional phrase but no verb)
- *The quick, brown fox in the woods* (still incorrect because it just adds another adjective but no verb)
- *The quick, brown fox and the squirrel in the woods* (still incorrect because it just adds another subject but no verb)

- The quick, brown fox jumping over the dog (still incorrect because it just adds an adjective phrase – “-ing” words are never verbs)

The only thing we can add to this to fix it is a verb:

- The fox *jumps* over the dog (correct because it adds the verb “jumps”).
- The fox *is* jumping over the dog (correct because it adds the verb “is”).

Un-joined dependent clause

The final type of fragment is an un-joined dependent clause. These are sometimes harder to spot as fragments, because unlike our previous examples, they actually have subjects and verbs. Let’s start with a dependent clause:

After the fox jumps over the dog

This has a subject (fox) and a verb (jumps), but it is still a sentence fragment because it begins with the conjunction “after.” To complete this fragment, we have to add something to it – specifically, we need to add something that can already stand on its own without any help: an independent clause:

The fox runs into the woods.

This is an independent, free-standing group of words. It has a subject (fox) and a verb (runs). We can add this to our fragment above and make it complete. We put this independent clause at the end (separated with a comma) or at the beginning (with no additional punctuation). We can also use pronouns to make the sentence flow better:

After the fox jumps over the dog, it runs into the woods.

The fox runs into the woods after it jumps over the dog.

Fixing Run-on Sentences

Remember that run-on sentences are not “sentences that are too long.” As with fragments, the length of a sentence has nothing to do with its completeness (The preamble to the U.S. Constitution is not a run-on sentence, even though it is over fifty words long). If a part of your essay has been marked as a run-on sentence, it means two complete sentences are mashed together. That is always the result of one of these causes:

- Missing punctuation
- Missing conjunction

People often think of fragments as “not enough” and run-ons as “too much.” In point of fact, run-ons are *also* sentences that don’t provide enough information.

Missing punctuation (fused sentence)

We’ve discussed independent (free-standing) and dependent (subordinate) clauses, and how they can be connected to make longer sentences. Most of the time, however, clauses need to have punctuation connecting them to other clauses. If that punctuation is missing, the result is a type of run-on known as a **fused sentence**:

The fox jumps over the dog it lifts its head in confusion.

Here we have two independent clauses – clauses that can be complete sentences by themselves. Because clauses always have a subject and verb, that’s a good place to start looking when it comes to fixing a run-on. If you can identify the subjects and verbs, it will be easier to find the clauses and separate them. In this case, our first subject is *the fox*. Our second is *it*. Our first verb is *jumps*, and the second is *lifts*. Once you’ve found the subjects and verbs, separating the clauses becomes simpler:

The fox jumps over the dog
It lifts its head in confusion

Remember that these are both independent clauses. This means that they *can* be separate sentences:

The fox jumps over the dog. It lifts its head in confusion.

Another way to fix them without separating them is to add a semicolon:

The fox jumps over the dog; it lifts its head in confusion.

Missing conjunction (comma splice)

People sometimes try to add a comma to a fused sentence to fix it. This is a mistake; a comma does *not* fix a fused sentence but simply trades one problem for another. When two independent (free-standing) clauses are joined with only a comma, that is a **comma splice**, which is still a run-on sentence:

The fox jumps over the dog, it lifts its head in confusion.

One way to fix a comma splice is to replace the comma with a semicolon or a period (like we did for the fused sentence). Another way is to add a conjunction. Specifically, a **coordinating conjunction** is needed. The most frequent ones to use are *and*, *but*, *or*, and *so* (there are a few others, but these are the most common). The conjunction is added after the comma:

The fox jumps over the dog, and it lifts its head in confusion.

Other Writing Center Resources

- Comma Usage
- Parts of Speech

Further Reading

- University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Center resource on fragments and run-ons: <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/fragments-and-run-ons/>