

COMMON SENTENCE-LEVEL WRITING ISSUES

Write in Complete Sentences: Look for comma splices, fragments, and run-on sentences. A comma splice is a specific type of run-on sentence in which a writer joins two independent clauses with a comma and leaves out a coordinating conjunction (e.g. I hit the ball, I ran to first base. Correct: I hit the ball, and I ran to first base.) A sentence fragment is part of a sentence that is set off as if it were a whole sentence. To test a sentence for completeness, look for the sentence's subject and verb, and then make sure the clause is not subordinate. Subordinate clauses serve as parts of sentences—nouns or modifiers—not as whole sentences (e.g. When the government devised the Internet. Correct: When the government devised the Internet, no expansive computer network existed.) Run-on sentences fuse two independent clauses together, and, depending on your intended meaning, can be corrected by: making the clauses into two, separate sentences; inserting a comma followed by a coordinating conjunction (such as and or but); inserting a semi-colon between the clauses; or subordinating one clause to the other.

Use Parallel Structure: Whenever you use a series, either in a sentence or in a list, try to give the parts of the series in parallel grammatical structure. That is, call attention to the similarities of the items in the series or list by using the same grammatical structure to introduce or name each one (e.g. #1: The meeting will deal with manufacturing, distributing, and how we market our products. Correct: The meeting will deal with manufacturing, distributing, and marketing. e.g. #2: This semester I plan to finish my thesis, applying for jobs, and taught creative writing. Correct: This semester I plan to finish my thesis, apply for jobs, and teach creative writing.)

Pronoun Reference: Pronouns (I, you, he, she, it, we, you, they, them, their, me, mine, my, our, ours, who, whom, some, any, few, etc.) should clearly refer to the nouns they stand for. For example, “Managers like engineers because they are pragmatic and logical” is ambiguous because it does not tell clearly whether the managers or the engineers are “pragmatic and logical.” You might revise the sentence this way: “Managers like the logical, pragmatic approach that engineers take to problems.” In this sentence, “John called the Quality Assurance manager, but he was busy and didn’t follow through,” who was busy, John or the manager? Try it this way: “After he called the Quality Assurance manager, John got busy and didn’t follow through.”

Misplaced Modifiers: Always place modifiers so that they point clearly to the word or phrase they modify. If you get them out of place, they will refer to the wrong part of your sentence. To illustrate this, let’s look at the word only, which often causes problems. In the sentence “He only arrived this morning,” you would be saying that he arrived this morning and did nothing else. What you would mean, though, is that “He arrived only this morning.” In the revised sentence, only modifies when he arrived, rather than his arrival itself. Similarly, only is misplaced in this sentence: “He only said that to make you feel good.” Instead, you should write, “He said that only to make you feel good.”

Dangling Modifiers: Dangling modifiers point to something that is not part of the sentence. That is, in the process of writing the sentence, a writer leaves out the word or phrase that the modifier points to. For example, “Knowing that you are a careful worker, the finished product will be excellent,” says that the finished product knows you are a careful worker. Revise the sentence to show who knows, like this: “Knowing that you are a careful worker, we are sure the finished product will be excellent.”

While misplaced and dangling modifiers will sometimes obscure your meaning, more often they will suggest that you are a careless writer who does not know or care enough to construct sentences carefully. Either way, as writers, we want to write as clearly as possible, and we don’t want to seem as if we are careless, especially when we are trying to solicit work from an individual or business.

Rewrite the following sentences so that they avoid the stylistic faults described above. Keep in mind that there is more than one way to revise each sentence.

(ANSWERS MAY VARY)

The new union contract should do three things. **It should** reduce the number of grievances, allow us to go three years without a strike, **and** it should also enable us to increase our production.

Parallel Structure

Custom-built products should be up about 50 percent, **looking at next year’s production.**

Dangling Modifier

We will need to have all field reports as soon as possible, **certainly** by the end of March.

Complete Sentences

Productivity increased by 15 percent **by arranging the typing pool.**

Dangling Modifier

The Production Control Department has designed a new inventory form, **which** they say will help them keep track of raw material more closely.

Complete Sentences

Management Information Systems has devised a computer program that will allow everyone in the Accounting Department to know about transactions as soon as they occur. **This** should keep our cash flow at a maximum, **especially** on weekends.

Complete Sentences

The company has devised a new retirement plan; **they** hope it will encourage a number of people to retire early.

Complete Sentences

Before we approve the new product, we need to know if it will be profitable, **attract** new customers, and **be** durable.

Parallel Structure

We finally gave up all hope of finishing on Thursday, **the** meeting having lasted well past five o'clock.

Complete Sentences

The above was borrowed and adapted from Richard P. Batteiger's Business Writing: Process and Forms (Wadsworth Publishing Company, California) and from The Little, Brown Compact Handbook.

ADDITIONAL EXERCISE

Please 1) correct the grammar, punctuation, and syntax errors in the following sentences, 2) briefly define the nature of the error or applicable rule and the approach you would use to explain it to a student writer, and 3) List any sentence-level errors you feel uncertain about tackling in a tutoring session. (If part two of your answer is the same for any two sentences, simply refer back to the number of earlier instance.)

1.) In deciding the case, illegally obtained evidence was used.

In deciding the case, the judge considered illegally obtained evidence.

2.) Teaching composition, I have learned how to vary class activities, tolerance for student angst, and the art of asking questions without having a specific answer in mind.

Since teaching composition, I have learned how to vary class activities, tolerate student angst, and ask open-ended questions.

3.) Weary firefighters see no way of extinguishing the flames; unless the strong winds subside.

The weary firefighters see no way of extinguishing the flames unless the strong winds subside.

4.) It made me feel better doing what I liked to do. And knowing that the man whose place I took would still be with his family.

Knowing that the man whose place I took would still be with his family made me feel better doing what I liked to do.

5.) These kind of issues frequently arise in the Red Light District.

These kinds of issues frequently arise in the red-light district.

6.) When they play often they end up fighting.

When they play, they often end up fighting.

7.) After a week of doing research, Sarah felt not only weary but also she was satisfied with what she had accomplished.

After a week of doing research, Sarah not only felt weary but also satisfied with what she had accomplished.

8.) By awarding \$10,000 scholarships, young writers will be encouraged.

By awarding \$10,000 scholarships, we will encourage young writers.

9.) The challenges of adulthood can seem frightening and overwhelming. If childhood and adolescence have already presented too many battles to fight.

If childhood and adolescence have already presented too many battles to fight, the challenges of adulthood can seem frightening and overwhelming.

10.) The chair of the Chemistry Department suggested that I write a letter of complaint about my professor, other than that, she had no advice to give me.

The Department of Chemistry chair suggested that I write a letter of complaint about my professor.

11.) Me and my dad went fishing on Saturday.

My dad and I went fishing on Saturday.

12.) The bicycle path should be located along Route 234 or to follow the Pendleton River.

The bicycle path should be located along Route 234 and follows the Pendleton River.

13.) Beginning at about age twenty, people enter a new world. Released from the restrictions adults place on them.

Around age twenty, people enter a new world in which they're released from the restrictions adults place on them.

14.) The teacher told Charles he would not pass the class, still he tried.

Even though the teacher told Charles he would not pass the class, he still tried.

15.) I would have been there had I known they were giving away free books.

Had I known they were giving away free books, I would have been there.

16.) He treats his men bad.

He treats his men badly.

17.) The sisters whose mother is in the hospital in a faraway city finds it hard to attend school.

The sisters, whose mother is in a faraway city hospital, find it hard to attend school.