

Fun, huh? The sentence has 60 words, but it's grammatically correct, using the same subject and verb as our previous example. Despite the murkiness of the one-thought-per-sentence rule, we can all agree that the party the night before and the upcoming trip make the sentence too long. But I digress. The point is that grammatically correct sentences may still be disastrous for a variety of reasons.

Run-on Sentences

A run-on sentence is the grammatically unacceptable result of inappropriately splicing together two complete sentences. For example: *The patient went to the hospital's emergency room early in the day complaining of stomach pains, she had begun feeling bad the night before.*

This "sentence" begins with the same subject and verb we've been using; in fact, it's the same sentence we examined earlier. But now it has a new sentence tagging along, sucking up oxygen from the one period. Notice that the new set of words is itself a complete sentence: *She had begun feeling bad the night before.* The subject is *she*, and the verb is *had begun*. The rest of the sentence, *feeling bad the night before*, tells us what began and when.

Here's the key: Each of those separate thoughts — going to the hospital today and feeling bad last night — is expressed as a complete sentence and deserves its own period.

Solution 1: Add a period

Often the simplest and best solution to the run-on problem is to put a period between the two sentences. For example: *The patient went to the hospital's emergency room early in the day complaining of stomach pains. She had begun feeling bad the night before.*

Solution 2: Use a semicolon

Perhaps the two short sentences created by the addition of a period seem choppy to you, breaking the flow of the writing. One way to bring two thoughts together in a way that won't offend the grammar curmudgeons or deprive the thoughts of vital oxygen is to use a semicolon. For example: *The patient went to the hospital's emergency room early in the day complaining of stomach pains; she had begun feeling bad the night before.*

Some of you may be deciding that this article is really just about punctuation because all I did in the last example was change a comma to a semicolon. Tell that to someone on a ventilator. We'll just replace that ventilator that's helping you breathe with a blender. I mean, they're both plug-in devices, right? Their function doesn't matter, does it?

See? Some punctuation can do the hard work of keeping a sentence alive. A period can do that, and so can a semicolon. A comma alone is too wimpy to support the life force of a sentence, so it can't join two complete sentences.

One of the places semicolons are most useful is when you join two sentences with one of the following words: *however, instead, rather, thus, therefore*. You can't just surround those words with commas (or worse, use a single comma!). To keep the two sentences separate, you need a semicolon before and a comma after: *The doctor examined her immediately; however, he could not identify the source of her pain.* The example has two complete sentences. In the first, *doctor* is the subject, and *examined* is the verb. In the second, *he* is the subject, and *could not identify* is the verb. To join those two related sentences with the word *however* requires a semicolon and a comma.

Don't go overboard with semicolons. Use them to join complete sentences only when the ideas in those sentences are closely related. And be warned that some readers find semicolons annoying even when they're used properly.

Solution 3: Use FANBOYS

Careful readers will have noted that I said earlier a comma *alone* is too wimpy to join two complete sentences. There is, however, a list of little words that provide the extra oomph the comma needs for this important task. We remember them with the mnemonic FANBOYS: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*. Add one of these words just after your comma, and your sentence survives.

We can fix the earlier example by adding *but* just after the comma: *The patient went to the hospital's emergency room early in the day complaining of stomach pains, but she had begun feeling bad the night before.*

Solution 4: Make one sentence dependent

Another way to avoid the problem of splicing together two sentences is, obviously, to make one of them *not* a sentence. A set of words that looks like a sentence, but isn't, is a clause. The clause has a subject and verb, but it begins with a word that makes the set unable to stand alone. Words like *although, even though, even if, until and because* subordinate a sentence to clause status.

When a clause begins with one of these words, we call it a *dependent clause* or a *subordinate clause*. Remember, it's no longer a sentence, so you don't have to (indeed, you can't) separate it from the remaining sentence with a period or semicolon. It depends on the remaining sentence for life, so it gets connected with a comma. *The patient went to the hospital's emergency room early in the day complaining of stomach pains, although she had begun feeling bad the night before.*

For creative examples of dependent clauses, see Grammar Bytes at <http://www.chompchomp.com/terms/subordinateclause.htm>.

Caveat

Don't depend on your computer to tell you when you've created a run-on sentence. Mine is batting less than .500 on distinguishing between run-on sentences and sentence fragments. This high-level work still requires live human beings.

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— [return to top](#)

— [return to Table of Contents](#)