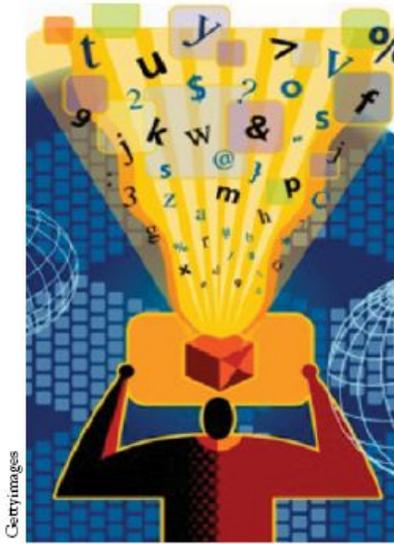


The Legal Writer

Running On?:

Life Support for Sentences

By Suzanne E. Rowe



Some legal writers must believe they have a cap on the number of periods they can use in any document. How else could they explain their rampant use of run-on sentences?

Well, one reason may be that they (not you!) don't understand the difference between a crisp, clear sentence that ends when it should and a run-on sentence that forces two perfectly good sentences to survive on the life support of a single period. Let's continue the health analogy by using examples from a situation in a hospital emergency room — just to emphasize the disaster of run-on sentences.

Complete Sentences

We all know that a sentence has a subject and a verb and expresses one thought. (Admittedly, the last part of that rule is murky because "one thought" is subjective.) We call this sentence complete because it has everything it needs to survive independently, including that lovely period at the end. For example: *The patient went.* The subject is *patient*, and the verb is *went*.

This example isn't very interesting because we don't know where the patient went or when or why. We can add that information without threatening the life of the sentence. For example: *The patient went to the hospital's emergency room.* The subject is still *patient*, and the verb is still *went*. The prepositional phrase *to the hospital's emergency room* provides more detail, where she went, without harming the sentence's basic structure.

Let's expand the example a bit further: *The patient went to the hospital's emergency room early in the day complaining of stomach pains.* This sentence still has the same subject and verb, but it also shows when and why the patient appeared.

We could keep expanding the sentence and not mess up the basic structure. At some point, though, the sentence may still be grammatically correct but lose clarity because of length. That type of sentence isn't the subject of this article, but here's an example: *The patient went to the hospital's emergency room early in the day complaining of stomach pains that had begun the previous night after she had attended a party given by her best friend, Serena, to celebrate their graduation from architecture school and to hear about the cross-country trip that Serena and her mother had planned to see family back East.*

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](#)