Combining Independent Clauses and Avoiding Run-Ons

THE WRITING CENTER
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A sentence is a **run-on** if it has different parts that aren't separated clearly with punctuation. Most often this is two or more **independent clauses** that aren't separated.

If a sentence contains two independent clauses, they can be separated in a couple different ways. The first and simplest option is just to let them be two separate sentences.

Jeremy isn't hungry. He doesn't want noodles right now.	Two separate sentences

If your independent clauses are very closely related and you want them to remain in the same sentence, a semicolon can be used in place of a period.

Jeremy isn't hungry; he doesn't want noodles right now.	Semicolon

It's also possible to join these clauses by making one **dependent** on the other and using a comma to join them together.

Because Jeremy isn't hungry, he doesn't want noodles right now.	Dependent and independent clause

Otherwise, you could just tweak the sentence to integrate the two clauses into one:

Jeremy isn't hungry for noodles right now.	Combined clauses

Finally, another option is that a comma plus a coordinating conjunction can hold two independent clauses together.

Jeremy isn't hungry, **so** he doesn't want noodles right now.	Comma + coordinating conjunction

Coordinating conjunctions are connecting words that give both clauses equal weight. Coordinating conjunctions are often taught as the acronym FANBOYS:

For, **A**nd, **N**or, **B**ut, **O**r, **Y**et, **S**o.

Note: without a coordinating conjunction, two independent clauses separated by a comma is a **comma splice error.**

*Comma Splice
See back!

Run-On Examples:

1. Grace tells Adam about her bad morning, she isn't sure he cares.*

   Grace tells Adam about her bad morning, though she isn't sure he cares. **(Dependent + independent clause)**

2. Apples, contrary to popular belief, aren't that healthy other fruits are much better.

   Apples, contrary to popular belief, aren't that healthy; other fruits are much better. **(Semicolon)**

3. The flowers are poking through the dirt, they're like the ones my grandma grows.*

   The flowers poking through the dirt are like the ones my grandma grows. **(Combined clauses)**

From an actual *Juicy Juice* bottle:

4. All juices may look the same but it's what's inside that matters.

   All juices may look the same, but it's what's inside that matters. **(Comma + coordinating conjunction)**

5. Our delicious sweetness comes from straight from the fruit, that's it!*

   Our delicious sweetness comes from straight from the fruit. That's it! **(Two separate sentences)**

Alex loves cats, she has a kitten named Emily. (Comma splice error)

The most common ways to correct these are as follows:

Alex loves cats. She has a kitten named Emily. (Two separate sentences)

Alex loves cats; she has a kitten named Emily. (Semicolon acts like a period)

Alex loves cats, and she has a kitten named Emily. (Comma + coordinating conjunction)

Because Alex loves cats, she has a kitten named Emily. (Dependent and independent)

Alex has a kitten named Emily. (Combined clauses)

When should you use each method of combining independent clauses?

While these methods are all grammatical, they all have slightly different effects:

- **Two separate sentences** – gets the information across more directly
- **Semicolon** – connects the two ideas strongly, more impactful
- **Dependent and independent clause** – highlights the relationship between the ideas
- **Combined clauses** – reduces some information, concise
- **Comma + coordinating conjunction** – keeps the ideas separate but flows smoothly

Let's look at a series of independent clauses and then combine them into a short paragraph to see each of these punctuation choices in action.

a) The rule of thirds in visual composition is one of the most useful tools for guiding the viewer's eye around an image.

b) The image is cut into a three-by-three grid.

c) One of the intersections is chosen to be the main focal point.

d) Another is chosen as a secondary focal point.

e) The primary and secondary focal points should never be on the same side of the image.

f) This sends the viewer's eye up and down in a line, away from the other side.

> **(a)** The rule of thirds in visual composition is one of the most useful tools for guiding the viewer's eye around an image. **(b)** The image is cut into a three-by-three grid; **(c)** one of the intersections is chosen to be the main focal point, and **(d)** another is chosen as a secondary focal point. **(e)** The primary and secondary focal points should never be on the same side of the image, since **(f)** this sends the viewer's eye up and down in a line, away from the other side.

Clause (a) holds enough information to stand as its own sentence, but the others work better combined; clauses with closely related information make more sense when they're in the same sentence together. Beginning a new sentence indicates a new idea, and a new sentence that continues the same idea can surprise the reader.

Clauses (c) and (d) are connected closely with a comma and coordinating conjunction between them—and this combined pair of clauses creates a full sentence when clause (b) is connected to it with a semicolon. Thus, the second sentence of this paragraph is made up of three independent clauses, connected using both a semicolon and a comma (plus conjunction).

As for clauses (e) and (f), clause (f) has a dependent relationship with clause (e), which means the most sensible way to combine them is with a subordinating conjunction, making clause (f) dependent. So, six choppy sentences that didn't display how all the information related became three more complex sentences that cohere more clearly.