

The Formula for Combining Sentences... at Your Fingertips!

Updated for the Writers Lab by Sherri Wahrer



Have the phrases 'comma splice' and 'run-on sentence' ever appeared in your instructor's comments on your draft? Have you ever felt your sentences seemed too 'choppy' when read aloud? If so, this handout's for you! Here you'll discover ways to write complex sentences and also acceptable, correct ways to punctuate them. First, let's define* the types of clauses we'll be working with: the independent clause, the dependent clause, and the adjective clause.

*An independent clause can stand alone as a complete sentence; it has both a subject and a predicate (a verb plus its auxiliaries and modifiers, if any): The children (subject) played outside (predicate).

*A dependent clause, on the other hand, cannot stand alone as a complete sentence. Several dependent clauses begin with subordinating conjunctions (words like although, because, until, when, if, whenever, and while) that indicate a link between the dependent clause and another clause. Sentence fragments are oftentimes dependent clauses 'illegally' standing alone: While (subordinating conjunction) the children (subject) played outside (predicate).

*An adjective clause (a.k.a a relative clause) attaches itself to a noun or pronoun by employing a relative pronoun or an adverb: who, whom, whoever, whose, that, which, when, or where. This type of clause enhances a noun or pronoun and is always encased in commas...one before the clause and one after it.

And now on to creating and punctuating complex sentences...

1. independent clause + comma + (and, but, for, or, nor, yet, so) + independent clause + ending punctuation

Example: It was cold outside, but Steve didn't wear his coat.

2. independent clause + semicolon + independent clause + ending punctuation

Example: It was cold outside; Steve took his coat out of the closet.

3. independent clause + semicolon + (however, besides, also, furthermore, therefore, thus, otherwise) + comma + independent clause + ending punctuation

Example: It was cold outside; however, Steve didn't feel it was cold enough to wear his coat.

4. clause, phrase, or word + comma + adjective phrase + comma + clause, phrase, or word + ending punctuation

Example: Steve, who didn't feel the temperature was too cold, went outside without wearing his coat.

5. if, when, after, although, because + dependent clause + comma + independent clause + ending punctuation

Example: If the temperature drops below freezing, Steve will wear his coat when he goes outside.

6. independent clause + colon + condition A + comma + condition B + comma + and + condition C + ending punctuation

Example: Steve will wear his coat outside when the following apply: the temperature drops below freezing, it's excessively windy, and it's snowing.

7. ", " he said.

Example: "I'll wear my coat when it's snowing outside," he said.

8. He said, "....."

Example: He said, "It's not cold enough outside yet."

9. ".....," he said; "....."

Example: "I don't know if it's cold outside," he said; "let me go check."

And now let's look at the most common error in sentence combining and punctuating...

independent clause + comma + independent clause + ending punctuation

Example: Steve won't wear his coat, it's not cold enough outside yet.

The sentence combination above is an example of the infamous comma splice, where two independent clauses (sentences that can stand alone) have been joined using only a comma. This sentence could easily be corrected by using a semicolon (;) in place of the comma. The other examples on this handout also provide correct ways in which the above clauses could be joined; feel free to experiment!