Comma Splices

A Guide to Recognizing and Avoiding Them
What is a comma splice?

• The term “comma splice” is often confusing to students
• It sounds like a punctuation error, but it’s not!
• A comma splice is NOT “a comma in the wrong place”
• Comma splices are serious grammar errors at the sentence level
• Comma splices are considered “major errors” by most writing teachers
Definition:

• A comma splice occurs when two independent clauses—clauses that could stand alone as sentences—are joined (“spliced”) with just a comma and without benefit of a coordinating conjunction

• Thus we have two sentences “pretending” to be one

• A fused sentence is closely related to a comma splice

• It occurs when two sentences are fused without the benefit of **any** punctuation
Consequences:

• Often, comma splices will not obscure the meaning of a sentence: the reader can still understand the writer’s message.

• However, when we have comma splices in our writing, we send a message to our readers that we are not competent writers; we do not quite understand what a sentence is (or isn’t)!

• This undermines our credibility, and our readers will not take our message as seriously as it should be taken.
Examples:

• I like all sports, basketball is probably my favorite.
• The writer makes some interesting points, he does not develop them very well.
• Colonial New England has a bloody history, many wars were waged over control of its rocky, unproductive soil.
• The Misfit is an interesting character, the speech he makes about religion is complex.
Special Cases:

• When a conjunctive adverb (however, moreover, and nevertheless are common ones) comes between two independent clauses and we join them with just a comma, it is **STILL** a comma splice!

• I like all sports, however, basketball is probably my favorite.

→ We still have two independent clauses joined by a comma—by definition, a comma splice.
Common Pattern:

• Beware of sentences in which the same word is repeated in the middle of the sentence on either side of a comma. This is a common comma splice pattern:

• I chose to write about Hawthorne, Hawthorne is one of the most famous American authors of the nineteenth century.
Comma splices make your English professor unhappy! Here is a picture of your professor when your essay has comma splices:
Scary, huh? Here is your English professor when your paper has no comma splices:
• Which would you rather have grading your essay?
How to Fix Comma Splices

• There are several ways to fix comma splices:
  ➔ Make the two independent clauses separate sentences by putting a period between them
  ➔ Change the comma into a semicolon (;). Semicolons are stronger than commas and can be used to link independent clauses
  ➔ Insert the appropriate coordinating conjunction (the “FANBOYS”: For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So) after the comma
When to choose which “fix”?  

• Which option you choose will depend upon a variety of circumstances  

• For example, if you are writing an in-class essay and catch a comma splice while proofreading, you should probably use a semicolon because it is the neatest “fix”  

• Always use semicolons when you have a conjunctive adverb (see slide 6) linking two independent clauses:  

→ I like all sports; however, basketball is my favorite.
More Fixes

• Use the appropriate FANBOYS to clarify the relationship between the ideas expressed in your independent clauses:

→ The writer makes some interesting points, but he does not develop them very well.

→ The Misfit is an interesting character, and the speech he makes about religion is very complex.
• We hope that helps!
• If you still have questions, come see us in the Success Center: Student Center 235, upstairs over the bookstore
• We have helping hands and helpful handouts!
• Comma splices are pesky, but together we can defeat them