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Writing a proper sentence and avoiding risky run-on sentences

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A *sentence* is a complete thought expressed in a precise combination of words. Formal relations between groups of words are an essential part of what determines the meaning of any *sentence*. A *sentence* combines two basic units of words: a *subject* (usually an actor) and a *predicate* (*verb* + *complements*). Both units are necessary to composing a complete and proper *sentence*.

Read this *sentence*:

1 - Andrew is visiting his sister.

This is a complete *sentence*. The *subject* is 'Andrew' and 'is visiting his sister' is the *predicate*. The *verb form* 'is visiting' is properly conjugated with the 3rd *person singular subject*, 'Andrew'.

Sometimes a speaker requires many *complements* to complete her or his idea. In *sentence* 1 above, there is only one *complement*: the *direct object*, 'his sister'. We can add more *complements* using *prepositional phrases*:

1b — Andrew is visiting his sister in Chicago for a month.

Note that both of these versions are *simple sentences*, having only one *subject* and one *predicate*.

What is a compound sentence?

A *compound sentence* is two *sentences* connected with a *coordinating conjunction* to make one *sentence*.

2 — Yasmine brought a salad and Alex brought desert.

3 — Johan went shopping but I sat in the park with my book.

A *compound sentence* is a *complex sentence*. Its meaning is made up of two complete thoughts plus the relationship between the two. This relationship is expressed in the *coordinating conjunction*. The *conjunction* 'and' expresses mutuality while 'but' expresses opposition.

What distinguishes a *sentence* from a *clause*?

A *clause* is a group of words made up of two units, a *subject* and a *predicate*, having all the same features of a *sentence*. The difference between the two is that a *clause* may be a complete thought: a *sentence*. It can also be an incomplete thought: not a *sentence*. All *sentences* are *clauses*, but not all *clauses* are *sentences*.

To write correct *sentences*, one must distinguish between a *subordinate clause* and an *independent clause*. A *subordinate clause* can not stand alone as a *sentence*. It is dependent on a *clause* that could form a complete, independent *sentence* if the *subordinate* was deleted.

3 — After the show ended, we all went out for a drink.

In *sentence* 3, we find 2 *clauses* divided by a comma. The first *clause*, 'After the show ended' is a *subordinate clause*. Combined with the main *clause*, 'we all went out for a drink' we have a complete *sentence*. Other examples of *subordinate clauses* are 'even if I had a million lives', 'whenever my uncle comes to town', 'as soon as I get your email', 'because he broke my heart'.

What is wrong with this *sentence*?

4 — Lincoln plays bass guitar in a band, they are very good.

This is a run-on sentence. It combines two *independent clauses* or *sentences* with a comma. This comma is called a *comma splice* and is not an accepted *conjunction* in academic writing in English.

What is wrong with this sentence?

A supernova is a star, we know that it comes from the explosion of a star that is bigger than the sun because it can outshine a galaxy.

This *sentence* contains five *clauses*. It connects two independent *clauses*, 'A supernova is a star' and 'we know' with a comma splice. The second independent *clause* is followed by a series of three *subordinate clauses*, 'that it comes from the explosion of a star', 'that is bigger than the sun', and 'because it can outshine a galaxy'.

This *sentence* also has a logical error, specifically an inversion of cause and effect. The idea expressed in the *clause*, "it can outshine a galaxy" is not the reason that "[a] supernova is a star that comes from the explosion of a star that is bigger than the sun". It is, rather, the other way around: "Because a supernova results from the explosion of a star that is bigger than the sun, it can outshine a galaxy."

It is possible and even common to write a correct *sentence* in English with three *subordinates* if you are an experienced writer. In fact, if we drop the first *clause* and begin with 'we', this *sentence* no longer constitutes a run-on in *form*: 'We know that it comes from the explosion of a bigger star than the sun because it can outshine a galaxy'." However, with its multiple clauses, such a sentence twists the thread of one's thoughts in an effort to connect them, and can easily lead an inexperienced writer to faulty logic.

Transforming run-on sentences:

RO: My brother was cautious, I was spellbound, we remained silent.

Rewrite: My brother was cautious while I was spellbound, but we both remained silent.

RO: Samir arrived early for his appointment, he had set his alarm clock for 5:30 am because he knew there would be a lot of traffic and he was right.

Rewrite: Samir arrived early for his appointment. He knew there would be a lot of traffic and so fortunately he set his alarm clock for 5:30 a.m.

RO: On Sunday, it was nice out, Jacques and Jean went boating, they glided under the bridge to sneak into the grounds of the château, the garden had run wild.

Rewrite: On Sunday, as it was nice out, Jacques and Jean went boating. They glided under the bridge to sneak into the grounds of the château. The garden had run wild.

Reminder: In English, we separate or link two *sentences* with a semi-colon or a period. A comma does not serve as a *coordinating conjunction* as it may in French.

Conclusion:

This short lesson provides the foundations for writing a correct *sentence* in English and points to risks of writing run-on *sentences*. We have seen that a comma cannot be used to join two *independent clauses*. To guard against run-ons, writers must be able to distinguish between an *independent clause* and a *subordinate clause*. Inexperienced writers can learn to limit the number of *clauses* they include in a single *sentence* by counting the number of *clauses* as they reread their work. Use of too many *clauses* often leads to confusing relations between clauses, and poor or faulty logic. A writer can only control her or his ideas by controlling the relationships between clauses and sentences.