

Sentence Checker: Punctuation, Run-ons & Fragments

Punctuation is really EASY if you know what you are doing AND if you take the time to develop the habit of good punctuation. Here are the basics:

- 1. Complete sentence basics.** A capital letter in the beginning and a period at the end signals a sentence! All units that look like this need to include three things: a subject (who or what is doing or being), a verb (what the subject is doing or being), and a complete thought. It's the last quality that bothers many people. Things that look like sentences but don't make sense send several negative messages to your reader:

You don't know what you're doing, or
You didn't care enough about the project to proofread, or
You don't care enough about your reader to make the reading easy.

Good sentence example: Our group worked well together.

Bad sentence example: Although our group worked well together.
Because our group worked well together.
Our group working well together.

These bad examples have subjects and verbs, but they don't make sense unless they get attached to another set of words.

Fixes: Although our group worked well together, we had some problems.
We had an amazing project because our group worked well together.
Our group accomplished a lot by working well together.

Note: There's nothing wrong with starting a sentence with words like although or because, as long as you end up with a complete idea.

- 2. Fragments:** If you see frag or fragment marked all over your papers, you are not checking your sentences for the three important elements. Read your paper aloud. If that doesn't help, read your paper backwards, starting from the end. You'll interrupt the flow of meaning and identify fragments that don't make sense on their own.

Fixing fragments:

- a. Attach the fragment to the sentence before or after it.
- b. Add the extra words you need to have the sentence make sense on its own.

- 3. Run-ons and comma splices:** In order to join two sentences together, remember these simple choices:

- a. Decide NOT to join them at all and leave them as two sentences. Sometimes people join too many sentences together. Two at a time is good enough.

<Our group worked well together. We finished the writing early.>

- b. Join them with comma and a conjunction (and, or, so, nor, but)

<Our group worked well together, so we finished the writing early.>

- c. Join them with a semi-colon.

<Our group worked well together; we finished the writing early.>

- d. Join them with a semi-colon, a transitional word, and a comma.

<Our group worked well together; therefore, we finished the writing early.>

- e. Join them with a dependent word like because, although, or since. (These are called dependent words because they make the phrase depend on another sentence for a full meaning.)

<Because our group worked well together, we finished early.>

<We finished early because our group worked well together.>

Notice the difference in punctuation!

Important reminders: (1.) Only use a semi-colon if you are joining two complete sentences. <There are other uses for semi-colons, but they don't involve joining sentences, so don't worry about them at this point.> **(2.) A comma is not strong enough on its own to hold two sentences together. That's called a comma splice.**

What is wrong with these sentences?

He didn't come to the group meetings; because he had trouble getting to campus.

He didn't come to the group meetings; but he was still a valuable member.

He didn't come to group meetings, he was still a valuable member.

- 4. Commas.** Some people add commas in several unnecessary places; that can be as annoying and hard to read as run-ons or fragments. Use a comma to:

- join two sentences with a conjunction (see 3b above),
- follow a phrase that comes **before** the subject in a sentence.
- to separate items in a series.
- on either side of a phrase that you could take out of the sentence and still have a complete thought, like a person's name or parenthetical definition.
- to signal contrast.

Don't use a comma to separate a subject and verb.

Check yourself carefully. Whether it's fair or not, in the real world, people will judge you by how well you can use words and communicate your ideas. It matters.