

comma splices + run-on sentences

A comma splice refers to a sentence in which two or more independent clauses have been “spliced” together with only a comma:

Mary went to the store, she drove her new car

Similarly, a run-on sentence refers to a sentence in which two or more independent clauses have simply run together, without commas or other forms of punctuation:

Mary went to the store she drove her new car

An independent clause refers to a group of words that can stand on its own as a sentence. This means that an independent clause has both a subject and a predicate.
For example:

Mary went to the store

She drove her new car

At best, comma splices and run-on sentences clutter your paper and create a mild distraction for your reader. At worst, comma splices and run-ons suggest that you do not have full control over your material. They can indicate that you have not determined where one thought ends and a new one begins. Fortunately, there are three easy ways to fix comma splices and run-on sentences.

1 Break the independent clauses into separate sentences. This is the best solution when your sentence itself is long or when the two independent clauses are relatively unrelated in thought:

Political polarization in America has grown sharper and more damaging in the 21st century, ← → the chief reason may be the rise of social media, which immerses users in a customized information landscape.

2 Use a semicolon. This is the best solution when you want to show a relationship between the two independent clauses or when you want a longer sentence to break up the rhythm of a paragraph with lots of short sentences.


Political polarization has grown sharper and more damaging in the 21st century; the timing is not coincidental, given the influence of social media.


3 Use a coordinating conjunction. A coordinating conjunction links independent clauses. There are seven coordinating conjunctions, and you can remember them using the acronym FAN BOYS: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.

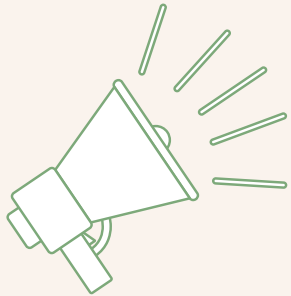
Political polarization has grown sharper and more damaging in the 21st century, and the timing is not coincidental, given the influence of social media.

A quick reminder about “however”

“However” and “but” are synonyms. Although they mean the same thing, they are not grammatically identical. “But” is a coordinating conjunction, meaning that you can use it to link independent clauses. “However” is not a coordinating conjunction, so if you string together independent clauses by using “however,” your sentence will still contain comma splices.

The two words are synonyms, but they are not grammatically identical. 

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As these rules indicate, comma splices and run-on sentences are easy to fix. The hard part is locating them in your prose. If you know that your writing is prone to run-ons or comma splices, then the best thing to do is to scrutinize each sentence individually during the proofreading process. Try reading your paper from end to beginning, so that you do not get caught up in the argument or examples. When you read each sentence, ask yourself whether it contains more than one independent clause. If so, then make sure that you have used one of the techniques outlined above.

Practice: which sentences below contain comma splices?



Disney's [movie] *Lady and the Tramp* is especially rich in allegorical energies. Driven from her posh suburban home by two evil Siamese cats, Lady [a cartoon cocker spaniel] runs away to the city, then Tramp, a streetwise stray, proudly shows her the ropes. Tramp clearly regards his unfettered life in the city's slums as preferable to the routinized confines of Lady's suburbia, for Lady's world is a land of fences, collars, and leashes. Standing in for the urban underclasses, Tramp lives high on the hog from handouts he gets from various families and restaurants, this suggests that the underclasses in general are largely composed of carefree beggars, happy to live off handouts, thus avoiding work and responsibility. The film clearly recommends Lady's bourgeois attitude over the Bohemian lifestyle of Tramp, however the film also reminds us that the irresponsible urban poor tend to be immigrants of suspect ethnicity. Thus, when Lady is briefly imprisoned in the dog pound, the denizens of the pound include a Mexican Chihuahua, a German (read Nazi) dachshund, a Cockney (read working-class) bulldog and a Gorky-quoting Russian wolfhound, his portrayal associates the underclasses with Russians and communists.

Example adapted from M. Keith Booker, *Disney, Pixar, and the Hidden Messages of Children's Films*