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PUNCTUATION

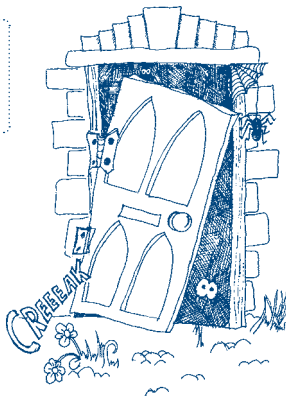
Full stop or comma?
(avoiding the dreaded ‘comma splice’)

PICTURE IT

A comma between two sentences is like a rusty hinge: it just isn't strong enough to hold the sentences together.

Students often make the mistake of joining two sentences with a comma. Sometimes the misplaced comma is referred to as a ‘comma splice’, and the resulting muddle is known as a ‘run-on sentence’ – a sentence that extends or *runs on* beyond its natural life. Here's an example:

- X** *The structure of DNA was discovered by James Watson and Francis Crick in 1953, until then it was considered a simple molecule.*



The easiest way to solve the problem is to split the joined sentences into two, like this:

✓ *The structure of DNA was discovered by James Watson and Francis Crick in 1953. Until then it was considered a simple molecule.*

(If you're unsure about what constitutes a sentence, please see Chapter 6.)



The bottom line is that in formal and academic writing, you should never use a comma in place of a full stop.

You *will* see sentences joined by commas in novels and short stories – even in works of non-fiction – but you will be hard pushed to find them in published academic work.

Recognising the problem

Have a look at the following extracts, all taken from student essays. Which of them contain comma splices, and are therefore wrong?

- 1 *This proves that MacDonald wasn't downstairs wearing the shirt when the crime took place, forensic analysis will almost certainly support this theory.*
- 2 *Protein molecules are made up of lengths of amino acids, the shape and behaviour of a protein molecule depends on the exact sequence of those amino acids.*
- 3 *It is striking how little this consensus resonates with public opinion, typically at least 60% of respondents in opinion polls express anti-trade views.*

The answer is that all the examples are wrong, because they all contain two main clauses – clauses that could stand as sentences in their own right.

Solving the problem

- 1 As we have seen, the simplest solution is to split the two parts into separate sentences, like this:

✔ *This proves that MacDonald wasn't downstairs wearing the shirt when the crime took place. Forensic analysis will almost certainly support this theory.*

You could in fact solve all instances of 'comma splice' in this way. Splitting spliced sentences in two will always solve the problem in grammatical terms, but may not be the best decision in terms of style.

- 2 If there is a continuity of thought between the two statements, a semicolon might be a better option:

✔ *Protein molecules are made up of lengths of amino acids; the shape and behaviour of a protein molecule depends on the exact sequence of those amino acids.*



But beware ... semicolons should be used sparingly, and until you feel absolutely confident about using them, it's probably best to divide your sentences with a full stop instead.

See Chapter 4 for more information on how to use semicolons.

3 Sometimes, the second statement explains or illustrates the first. In such instances, a colon may be used:

✔ *It is striking how little this consensus resonates with public opinion: typically, at least 60% of respondents in opinion polls express anti-trade views.*

Chapter 3 explains how to use colons.

4 The final solution is to join the main clauses with a conjunction (such as ‘and’, ‘but’, ‘so’, ‘yet’, ‘for’ and so on) after a comma:

✔ *Many language theories have attempted to explain how children accomplish the incredible feat of learning a language from scratch, but it is doubtful whether any of these theories can fully account for the language acquisition capacity of the human infant.*

Proofreading for comma splices

Don’t rely on the grammar checking facility on your computer to detect this problem: such programs don’t always pick up on comma splices. Instead ...

- 1** Read through each questionable sentence and ask yourself, ‘Would the clauses on either side of the comma make sense on their own as separate sentences?’
- 2** If the answer is yes, then they shouldn’t be joined by a comma.
- 3** Use one of the four solutions outlined in this chapter.

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