The Writing Center @ JSCC
Clausal Errors

Clausal errors are among the most egregious errors found in writing. They may lead to misunderstanding, but more importantly they mark a writer as inexperienced. The three major clausal errors are **fragments, comma splices, and fused sentences** (sometimes called run-ons).

Background Information — Phrases and Clauses

A **phrase** is a group of words that works as one part of speech, like a noun phrase or a verb phrase. The important difference between a phrase and a clause is that a clause is made of both a subject noun phrase and a tensed verb; a phrase is missing at least one of those elements.

For example, *in the garage* is a prepositional phrase because it is headed up by a preposition (in). *The garage* is a noun phrase. A verb phrase is headed up by a verb, as in *wrote my essay*. Phrases may be quite long, as in this example: *Walking from the grocery store on Racine Avenue to the garage behind my neighbor Lucinda's house*. This example has several noun phrases, but it contains no tensed verbs.

A **clause** is the combination of a subject and a tensed verb. A **subject** is the noun phrase that tells us what the sentence is about. A **tensed verb** is a verb that is in the present or past tense. Examples of clauses include the following sentences:

1. The car is in the garage. [*The car* serves as our subject noun phrase; *is* serves as our tensed verb (in the present tense).]

2. Shakeila and Luis decided to walk from the store on Racine Avenue to the garage. [*Shakeila and Luis* is our subject; *decided* is our past-tense verb.]

A **subordinate clause** is simply a clause (combination of a subject and tensed verb) that has a **subordinating conjunction** at the beginning. (See our handout of subordinating conjunctions for a list.) Here are some examples:

1. Because the car is in the garage [*the car* is still our subject; *is* remains our tensed verb. However, the addition of *because* turns our clause into a subordinate clause.]

2. If Shakeila and Luis decided to walk from the store on Racine Avenue to the garage [*Shakeila and Luis* is still our subject; *decided* is still our past-tense verb. The subordinating conjunction *if* turns our clause into a subordinate clause.]

Fragments

Fragments are created when a writer punctuates a phrase or a subordinate clause as if it were an independent clause. Here are examples of each type of fragment:

1. Doing my homework after midnight. [This is only a phrase. There's no subject, no tensed verb.]

2. Amy trying to make tiramisu by herself for the first time. [This is a phrase, lacking a tensed verb.]

3. Because the neighbor called the police during the party. [This is a subordinate clause.]

4. The car might be a good deal for your first car. If the dealership will replace the tires before you buy it. [The second "sentence" is a fragment — a subordinate clause.]

To correct examples 1 and 2, simply add a subject, a tensed verb, or both. To correct examples 3 and 4, eliminate the subordinating conjunction or combine the two clauses into a single sentence. Here are the possible corrections:

1. *I hate* doing my homework after midnight. [We've added a subject, *I*, and a tensed verb, *hate*.]

2. Amy *is* trying to make tiramisu by herself for the first time. [We have added a tensed verb, *is*.]

3. The neighbor called the police during the party. [We have eliminated the subordinating conjunction *because*.]

4. The car might be a good deal for your first car if the dealership will replace the tires before you buy it. [We have combined the two clauses into one sentence.]

Comma Splices

Comma splices are formed when a writer uses only a comma to separate independent clauses. Here are some examples of comma splices:

1. Ramon planted carrots in his garden this year, carrots are his favorite vegetable.

2. Elisa found a dollar in her winter coat, it made her day!

3. The dogs ran around the yard playing together, they played tug-of-war with a new toy.

4. Michael is moving to Jamaica to study tropical plants, but he will return to spend Yom Kippur with his family, his friends will be happy to see him for the holiday as well.

Each of these comma splices uses only no punctuation to join two independent clauses. Comma splices can be corrected in several ways:

A) Replace the comma with a period.

B) Replace the comma with a semicolon or a colon.

C) Add a coordinating conjunction to the sentences, after the comma.

D) Add a subordinating conjunction to either the first or the second clause.

Here are corrections:

1. Ramon planted carrots in his garden this year *since* carrots are his favorite vegetable. [We replaced the comma with the subordinating conjunction *since*.]

2. Elisa found a dollar in her winter coat, *and* it made her day! [We added the coordinating conjunction *and* to join the sentences.]

3. The dogs ran around the yard playing together; they played tug-of-war with a new toy. [We replaced the comma with a semicolon.]

4. Michael is moving to Jamaica to study tropical plants, but he will return to spend Yom Kippur with his family. His friends will be happy to see him for the holiday as well. [We created two independent clauses by replacing the second comma with a period.]

Run-ons/Fused Sentences

Fused sentences are sometimes called run-on sentences. Technically, a run-on sentence is simply a sentence that contains too much information for its own good, but some professors use the terms interchangeably. When you hear the term run-on, then, remember that your professor may mean that you have created a fused sentence.

A fused sentence is a sentence that uses no punctuation whatsoever to join two independent clauses. To illustrate the point, we will use the same sentences from the comma splices examples above, since the corrections are the same.

1. Ramon planted carrots in his garden this year carrots are his favorite vegetable.

2. Elisa found a dollar in her winter coat it made her day!

3. The dogs ran around the yard playing together they played tug-of-war with a new toy.

4. Michael is moving to Jamaica to study tropical plants, but he will return to spend Yom Kippur with his family his friends will be happy to see him for the holiday as well.

Each of these fused sentences uses only no punctuation to join two independent clauses. Fused sentences can be corrected in several ways:

A) Add a period, colon, or semicolon after the first independent clause.

B) Add a comma + coordinating conjunction to the sentences.

C) Add a subordinating conjunction to either the first or the second clause.

Here are corrections:

1. Ramon planted carrots in his garden this year *since* carrots are his favorite vegetable. [We added the subordinating conjunction *since* after the first independent clause.]

2. Elisa found a dollar in her winter coat, *and* it made her day! [We added a comma followed by the coordinating conjunction *and* to join the sentences.]

3. The dogs ran around the yard playing together; they played tug-of-war with a new toy. [We joined the sentences with a semicolon.]

4. Michael is moving to Jamaica to study tropical plants, but he will return to spend Yom Kippur with his family. His friends will be happy to see him for the holiday as well. [We created two independent clauses by inserting a period.]