A Common Error

Here are two simple complete sentences. Each one is a single independent clause. (The S means subject; the V means verb.)

\[
\begin{array}{c c}
S & V \\
\text{The big dog growled.} & \text{We ran away.}
\end{array}
\]

The period at the end of the first sentence is correct.

We can also use a semicolon (;) between the same two independent clauses.

Correct: The big dog growled; we ran away.

The semicolon moves the clauses a little closer to each other. A semicolon is a less powerful stop than a period. Punctuating the sentence this way might help the reader see the cause-and-effect relation between the growling and the running.

We can use a conjunction to join the same two clauses. A conjunction makes the cause-and-effect relation perfectly clear.

Correct: The big dog growled, so we ran away.
Correct: We ran away because the big dog growled.

The conjunction in each sentence is in **bold italic** type.

What we **cannot** do is stick the two independent clauses together with a puny little comma.

Incorrect: The big dog growled, we ran away.

This is an example of a **comma splice**—two independent clauses stuck together with a comma. We do not write comma splices in college classes. People who write comma splices do not pass English 101.

Here’s another pair of independent clauses.

\[
\begin{array}{c c}
S & V \\
\text{A cold northeast wind blew all day.} & \text{We didn’t go to the lake.}
\end{array}
\]

The following are correct ways to express the same idea.

Semicolon: A cold northeast wind blew all day; we didn’t go to the lake.
Conjunction: A cold northeast wind blew all day, so we didn’t go to the lake.
Conjunction: We didn’t go to the lake because a cold northeast wind blew all day.
Conjunction: Because a cold northeast wind blew all day, we didn’t go to the lake.

The next example is a comma splice.

Incorrect: A cold northeast wind blew all day, we didn’t go to the lake.

**Do not connect independent clauses with only a comma.**

To avoid comma splices, you must be able to identify the independent clauses in your writing. To identify independent clauses, you must identify subjects, verbs, and subordinating conjunctions (see the handout called “Clauses and Phrases”).

You might want to practice identifying independent clauses in the drafts of your essays. Print a draft and go through it with a pencil, marking the subjects and verbs. Then look for subordinating conjunctions. Then identify the independent clauses and make sure that you haven’t spliced two independent clauses with a comma. When you find a comma splice in your writing, fix it.

Conjunctive Adverbs

Here’s a longer, more complex comma splice.

Having too much vitamin X in one’s diet can cause health problems, for instance, extremely high levels of vitamin X have been known to cause a person’s earlobes to fall off.

The problem here is “for instance.” It looks like a conjunction—a thing that joins clauses. But it’s not. In the example, “for instance” belongs to a group of words called **conjunctive adverbs**. When a
Understanding and Avoiding Comma Splices

A conjunctive adverb is used between two clauses, as in the example above, it needs a semicolon—and not a comma—before it.

Here’s the correctly punctuated version of the example; note the semicolon.

Having too much vitamin X in one’s diet can cause health problems; for instance, extremely high levels of vitamin X have been known to cause a person’s earlobes to fall off.

A semicolon is the correct punctuation before a conjunctive adverb. A comma is incorrect.

Here’s a list of some conjunctive adverbs. Note that certain prepositional phrases (such as “in the meantime”) can function as conjunctive adverbs.

- however*
- consequently
- furthermore
- nevertheless
- for instance
- moreover
- hence
- accordingly
- besides
- for example
- likewise
- therefore
- indeed
- in the meantime
- instead
- in this case
- on the other hand
- as a result
- also
- subsequently

Incorrect punctuation with conjunctive adverbs (comma splices):

Many students regard grammar as unimportant, however, they all fail English class.
He was at a party until 3 a.m., consequently, he fell asleep in class.
Good books engage the brain, on the other hand, TV encourages passive stupidity.

Correct punctuation (semicolons) with the same conjunctive adverbs:

Many students regard grammar as unimportant; however, they all fail English class.
He was at a party until 3 a.m.; consequently, he fell asleep in class.
Good books engage the brain; on the other hand, TV encourages passive stupidity.

We can combine some conjunctive adverbs with plain old conjunctions, as in

He read none of the handouts that the instructor gave the class, and consequently he failed all the tests.

In this example, the conjunctive adverb consequently is combined with the conjunction and. Since the sentence has the conjunction—and—the correct punctuation is a comma. Here are a few more examples of conjunctive adverbs combined with conjunctions; the conjunctive adverbs are in **bold italic** type, and the conjunctions are **underlined**.

His suit was a strange green color, **and moreover** the jacket was four sizes too large.
He should have used Dexron III fluid when he serviced the transmission, **but instead** he used some old Type F fluid, **and as a result** he had to buy a new transmission.
I will not let you borrow my lawn mower, **and furthermore** I want my leaf blower back.

Since each conjunctive adverb is combined with a conjunction, the correct punctuation is a comma. If we remove the conjunction, we replace the comma with a semicolon: **I will not let you borrow my lawn mower; furthermore, I want my leaf blower back.**

*However* is a tricky word that has more than one meaning. We often use it as a synonym for but, in which case however is preceded by a semicolon: *She screamed; however, no one heard her.* But however is also an adverb meaning “in any way” or “no matter how,” as in *Dress however you like* and *Grammar is confusing however you explain it.* Those sentences have no punctuation before however. The word’s function in a sentence determines the correct punctuation.

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