



## **RUN-ONS, FRAGMENTS, AND SENTENCE VARIETY**

Writing is like music. Rhythm needs to change. Words need to sing. Sentences need variation. They require conclusions at the appropriate times. Pauses must be planned. Keep the reader's attention. Surprise them with sentences that stop short. Keep them on their toes with lengthy lines of argument that balance the melody of clarity with the harmony of complexity and engage their eyes in the song of your argument.

This handout will address two common writing mistakes (run-on sentences and sentence fragments) and one method for making your writing grab your reader's attention. Once you rid your paper of the sentence mistakes, you can check the variation of your sentence length to bring your writing to life.

### **Run-on Sentences and Sentence Fragments**

These mistakes can be hard to identify and you could (should) use grammar checkers like Grammarly or even the checker in MS Word. However, nothing beats the human eye because even online grammar checkers can be wrong. Grammar checkers are aids not replacements for proper English usage.

#### **Terms**

*Run-on sentences* are independent clauses (full sentences) that are missing punctuation between them. They run on and on and on without giving the reader a break.

*Sentence fragments* are sentences that are missing parts, specifically a subject or main verb.

#### **Identifying Problems**

*READ ALOUD.* This is the most effective way to find run-ons and fragments. When you are reading, you will hear when a sentence stops awkwardly. Even children (native English speakers) can hear sentence fragments even if they do not have the words to say it is missing a main verb. You can feel when you need to take a breath but the sentence keeps going. Without analyzing

grammar just the feeling that you need to come up for air, lets you know that punctuation is missing.

*Try different emphases.* When reading the sentence, exaggerate the pauses. Wait extra long on periods or semicolons. Even if you feel like a pause should happen, if there is no punctuation, rush through the sentence. Then reread it. This time put the emphases in place that you think they should be and ignore the written punctuation. Put punctuation in those places and try it again.

*Double-check with an online grammar checker.* Once you have reworked your sentences several times and feel the writing is the best you can do, check it. This can help you see what you missed. You can also read the suggested corrections aloud to see if they sound right and emphasize the sentence the way you want. However, **do not automatically follow the grammar checker**. These tools are not perfect and you must use them critically rather than blindly.

### **Example**

“Samuel walked down the street and John ran into him on the corner therefore they decided to go to the park and because it was a sunny day they decided to eat lunch there too. They played games. Getting late. They decided to go out to dinner. When they were full. Then they both went to their own homes and they both told their families about the great day and their families were happy to hear about it.”

Try reading it aloud and seeing what issues you spot. I will jump to grammar checkers and show some of the issues that arise.

### *Grammar Checker Analysis*

Copy/pasting into this **free online version of Grammarly**

(<https://www.grammarly.com/grammar-check>), one suggestion was made: insert two commas.

Samuel walked down the street and John ran into him on the corner, therefore, they decided to go to the park and because it was a sunny day they decided to eat lunch there too.

Using **MS Word**, one suggestion was made: insert one comma.

Samuel walked down the street and John ran into him on the corner therefore they decided to go to the park and because it was a sunny day, they decided to eat lunch there too.

Using **Google Docs** spelling and grammar check, no suggestions were made.

### *My Analysis*

“Samuel walked down the street and John ran into him on the corner, therefore, they decided to go to the park and, because it was a sunny day, they decided to eat lunch there too. They played games. It was getting late. They decided to go out to dinner. When they were full, they left. Then they both went to their own homes. They both told their families about the great day and their families were happy to hear about it.”

*Run-on.* The second set of commas makes the phrase an aside. You could read the sentence without “because it was a sunny day” and it would still make sense. Using these commas also causes the reader to pause at this phrase.

*Fragment.* “It was getting late” is necessary because your sentence must have a subject. “Getting late” leaves the reader hanging. Who was getting late? What was getting late? You need a subject for the verb.

*Fragment.* “They left” was added because you need a main verb. If you read “when they were full,” you expect something to conclude it. It is giving you a preceding event but it is missing the main action (main verb).

*Run-on.* The final sentence could have been broken up in several places or just made into a series with commas. However you decide to arrange this sentence, when you have “and” multiple times in a row, it is a clue that your sentence might be a run-on.

## Sentence Variety

Fixing run-ons and fragments corrects improper grammar. However, proper punctuation falls short of making an enjoyable read. Making your paragraph more exciting might be difficult for second language speakers, but it can be done. Using the steps for finding issues, specifically *reading aloud*, can also help you get a feel for the phrasing. You do not want all long or complex sentences, but you also do not want all short staccato phrases either. The language should flow like speech. Short phrases can accentuate points while lengthy sentences can build up to your thesis.

**Note:** Sentence variation should follow some general principles, but many decisions for implementing these principles are based on the author's style of speaking/writing, desired emphasis, or preference on a particular day. The guidelines that I am presenting can be used to break up or join these sentences in several ways and this is just one possible way to rearrange them.

Let's look at some ways to upgrade the example that I corrected for run-ons and fragments.

*“Samuel walked down the street and John ran into him on the corner, therefore, they decided to go to the park and, because it was a sunny day, they decided to eat lunch there too. They played games. It was getting late. They decided to go out to dinner. When they were full, they left. Then they both went to their own homes. They both told their families about the great day and their families were happy to hear about it.”*

### Topic Sentence

The first sentence is the topic of the paragraph and presents the main idea to the reader.

*“Samuel walked down the street and John ran into him on the corner, therefore, they decided to go to the park and, because it was a sunny day, they decided to eat lunch there too.”*

This is really long for a topic sentence. This could be more effective as shorter sentences.

*“Samuel walked down the street and John ran into him on the corner! Therefore, they decided to go to the park and, because it was a sunny day, they decided to eat lunch there too.”*

This isolates the event that starts the whole day: Samuel and John ran into each other on the street. If you read this and pause at the exclamation point, the importance of this event will jump out at you and the rest of the paragraph will flow more naturally from it.

## Staccato Sentences

The middle of the paragraph is the argument. These build up to the resolution and should flow together well. These sentences, however, are choppy: *“They played games. It was getting late. They decided to go out to dinner. When they were full, they left.”*

A smoother flow would be: *“They played games in the park, but it was getting late. So, they decided to go out to dinner and when they were full, they left.”*

Instead of several separate ideas that the reader must link together, these sentences connect the dots. We now seamlessly move the characters from the park to the restaurant and beyond by explaining why they decided to move.

## Concluding Sentence

We noted earlier that the final sentence was a run-on. It was broken into two but in a way that is repetitive: *“Then they both went to their own homes. They both told their families about the great day and their families were happy to hear about it.”*

The final sentence should conclude the paragraph and draw together all the evidence (or narrative) that followed the topic sentence. In this case, a longer sentence with a list of concluding actions resolves the paragraph better: *“Then they both went to their own homes, told their families about the great day, and their families were happy to hear about it.”*

It might still feel repetitive, but it resolves the narrative in shorter phrasing and with a less significant break in the concluding action (i.e., no period after going home).

## Paragraph Comparison

### *Original*

Samuel walked down the street and John ran into him on the corner, therefore, they decided to go to the park and, because it was a sunny day, they decided to eat lunch there too. They played games. It was getting late. They decided to go out to dinner. When they were full, they left. Then they both went to their own homes. They both told their families about the great day and their families were happy to hear about it.

### *Varied sentences*

Samuel walked down the street and John ran into him on the corner! Therefore, they decided to go to the park and, because it was a sunny day, they decided to eat lunch there too. They played games in the park, but it was getting late. So, they decided to go out to dinner and when they were full, they left. Then they both went to their own homes, told their families about the great day, and their families were happy to hear about it.