

Issue: Run-On Sentences

A little background for explanation

(1) Structure of a simple sentence: SV(O)

A simple sentence consists of at least a **S**ubject and a **V**erb (and often also an **O**bject), short: **SV(O)** (in that order).

[All freshmen] [have to take] [FYW 1050].
S V O

(2) Content of a simple sentence: One complete thought

A simple sentence expresses (i) a complete **statement**, (ii) a **question**, or (iii) a **command**.

- (i) All students completed their homework.
- (ii) Did all students complete their homework?
- (iii) Complete your homework!

(3) Punctuation in a simple sentence: Period, question mark, or exclamation mark at the end

A simple sentence starts with a capital letter and **ends with** (i) a **period** (for statements), (ii) a **question mark** (for questions), or (iii) an **exclamation mark** (for commands).

- (i) All students completed their homework.
- (ii) Did all students complete their homework?
- (iii) Complete your homework!

Commas do not end sentences; they only separate parts of sentences.

(4) Intonation in a simple sentence: Lowering of the voice and a longer pause at the end

- Period > at the end of a sentence > pausing and lowering of the voice
- Comma > within a sentence > pausing without lowering of the voice

Students are explicitly taught (1) and generally also understand (2) and (3). Any student who has ever taken a formal English course (ESL) will be familiar with the concept SV(O)—one of the most basic rules of English—and you can reliably draw on that knowledge by just reminding them: SV(O)! Students also have an intuitive understanding of the relationship between intonation and sentence structure (basically, that the voice goes down at the end of a sentence). But they may not be aware of

- the cultural conventions for punctuation—in particular, that run-on sentences are considered “bad” style in English
- the exact relationship between intonation and punctuation (difference between commas and periods and their reflex in intonation)

Some reasons why L2 writers produce run-on sentences (and comma splices)

- The writing systems of Chinese and Arabic do not use punctuation the way our writing system does.
- Cultural conventions for punctuation differ, even in languages that share our writing system:
 - In Arabic writing, one paragraph = one long sentence (spanning several lines) is not considered bad style at all but is fully acceptable.
 - In some cultures (including many European ones), long and complex (and often unnecessarily convoluted) sentences are often seen as a hallmark of academic writing.
 - Even in a language as closely related to English as German, you can find plenty of comma splices in writing (not necessarily considered poor style), including in journalism.
- Learners are not aware of the correlation between intonation (in speaking) and punctuation (in writing) unless it is made explicit to them.
- Some students seem to think punctuation is optional.

Note that, as a result, many L2 writers fail to recognize and integrate into their writing any edits you make to their punctuation if you edit their papers for them (so let them do the writing).

- On an entirely different level, some L2 writers, especially those at lower levels of English proficiency, may altogether lack the grammatical knowledge of how grammatically correct complex sentences are formed in English, including
 - the difference between main/independent clauses and subordinate/dependent clauses
 - the different types of subordinate clauses: relative clauses (also called ‘adjective clauses’), subject and complement clauses (also called ‘noun clauses’), adverbial clauses (also called ‘adverb clauses’), and conditional clauses
 - the difference between adverbial clauses (while/whereas ..., ...) and transition/introductory phrases (however, .../ in contrast, ...)

How you can help students

Let the students do the writing. If you edit students’ papers for them, and they don’t know the underlying rules, they will fail to recognize and integrate the edits you make to their punctuation into their writing. Instead:

- make sure that students understand the cultural conventions and the meaning of punctuation,
- help students “notice” where commas are used incorrectly or punctuation is missing,
- and then have the students make the necessary corrections.

➤ Together with the student, look for where commas could be turned into periods.

(1) Explain the **cultural conventions for punctuation**: that **run-on sentences** (and comma splices) are considered **poor style in English writing**; that a paragraph cannot be made up solely of one long sentence spanning several lines; that it is better to have shorter sentences than sentences that are too long and too complex; and that (in principal) there is absolutely nothing wrong with a text that consists of simple sentences only, i.e. is of the form SV(O). SV(O). SV(O). ...

(2) Remind students of the **connection between intonation and punctuation**—that **punctuation in writing** is supposed to reflect **intonation in speaking**.

- **Pausing and lowering of the voice > at the end of a sentence > period**
- **Pausing without lowering of the voice > within a sentence > comma**
- Direct questions and commands have a different intonation, but since they are less relevant in writing, you can neglect them.
- Two juxtaposed clauses separated by a semicolon require a special contrastive intonation, on top off closely related meanings and parallel structures, so they are rather infrequent (if used correctly) and you can neglect these as well.

➤ A note on the use of the semicolon: in case students ask, you can tell them that, in essence, anywhere where a semicolon is justified, a period (followed by a capital letter, of course) will do just as well (= one rule less to remember).

(3) Read out students' writing for them, making your intonation match their (correct and incorrect) punctuation to help them "hear" where their punctuation is wrong.

(4) Help students make use of the Speak function on their iPads to literally "hear" where their punctuation is wrong.

- Highlight the text to be read out aloud and hit "Speak."
- The Speak function will read out the text in such a way that its intonation reflects the (incorrect) punctuation.
- But the document must be in MS Word or PDF with text recognition because the Speak function does not work on Google Docs and PDFs without text recognition (i.e. text from a photo or scanned text).

(5) Once students notice where a sentence actually ends, they can make the necessary corrections themselves. The problem for many L2 learners is the "noticing" of errors.

Example for run-on sentences and suggested revisions

"The book talks about how you can live with others and how you can get the keys to solve your problems and how you can deal with people. The author starts his book with his experiences and then starts to write about how people can live together and make concessions to each other because everybody is not the same and the author believes you might like or love something and your wife or son or brother don't like it at that moment you should give the sacrifice for them and for yourself."

- Revision suggested for writers at **lower proficiency** levels, focusing on punctuation and capitalization only:

The book talks about how you can live with others, **and** how you can get the keys to solve your problems, and how you can deal with people. The author starts his book with his experiences, **and** He then starts to write about how people can live together and make concessions to each other because everybody is not the same, **and** The author believes you might like or love something, and your wife, ~~or~~ son, or brother don't like it. At that moment you should give the sacrifice for them and for yourself.

- Possible revision at **higher proficiency** levels, including revised sentence structure (though ignoring remaining issues with the sentence):

. . . The author believes that **if** you like or love something, **but** your wife, son, or brother doesn't like it, you should give the sacrifice for them and for yourself.

Related issue: comma splices

“There wasn't even a police investigation, the guy just robbed her and left the area.”

- Revision suggested for writers at **lower proficiency** levels, focusing on punctuation and capitalization only:

There wasn't even a police investigation. The guy just robbed her and left the area.

- Possible revisions that can be expected of **more advanced** writers:

- (a) There wasn't even a police investigation; the guy just robbed her and left the area.
- (b) The man just robbed her and left the area. There wasn't even a police investigation.

Related issue: mixed constructions

“If you know how to speak so you know how to listen and understand how to answer.”

“Although, in Saudi Arabia the education is not that bad but the problem is that the teachers don't know exactly how to teach in a different language.”

“Although most people believe that an arranged marriage is forcing the children to marry, but I believe that arranged marriages are all about choice not forcing.”

- Here, students just need a reminder that the following cannot co-occur in one sentence:

*if ... so ...

*although ... but ...

*because ... therefore ...