

PREVENTION OF ERRORS IN SENTENCE STRUCTURE

Violation of the principle of unity is the major cause of errors in sentence structure.

Among the most common errors are:

1. sentence fragments,
2. comma faults,
3. fused sentences,
4. choppy sentences,
5. dangling modifiers, and
6. inconsistencies in point of view.

These wrong constructions do not conform to the definition of a sentence as a unit of thought or a unit of feeling expressed through a logically related subject and predicate (verb and complement). The following part is a discussion of these errors and of possible ways to correct them.

1. Sentence Fragments

If a group of words lacks either of the required parts of a sentence—subject and predicate—or does not express a single complete unit of thought or feeling, that group of words constitutes not a sentence but a sentence fragment. This error is sometimes called a period fault because the period appears before the sentence is complete. Any dependent element if written alone, is a sentence fragment.

The illustrations that follow show how the most common types of sentence fragments can be corrected (1) by attaching them to neighboring sentences or (2) by changing them into separate sentences.

*Sentence fragment: The volunteers who built the building.

Correction: The volunteers who built the building found the task easy.

*Sentence fragment: Paul wins a medal every winter. For feeding squirrels during blizzards.

Correction: Paul wins a medal every winter for feeding squirrels during blizzards.

Correction: Paul wins a medal every winter. He feeds the squirrels during blizzards.

* Sentence fragment: As a grown man, Jim remembered his first bicycle. The Christmas gift that had opened for him a new world of experiences.

Correction: As a grown man, Jim remembered his first bicycle, the Christmas gift that had opened for him a new world of experiences.

Correction: As a grown man, Jim remembered his first bicycle. This Christmas gift had opened for him a new world of experiences.

2. Comma Fault

A comma fault (comma splice) is the error in which a comma is used to separate two independent clauses not joined by a coordinating conjunction. The comma fault may be corrected in various ways, depending on the relationship between the ideas in the two independent clauses. If the ideas are not sufficiently related to form a unit, the comma should be replaced by a period.

Comma fault: Nancy hoped that her house would be quiet so that she could read her new novel, she wanted to finish reading the novel and then give it to a friend.

Correction: Nancy hoped that her house would be quiet so that she could read her new novel. She wanted to finish reading the novel and then give it to a friend.

If the ideas are closely related to form a unit, the comma may be replaced by a semicolon.

*Comma fault: Many friends called in person to congratulate the new governor, others sent him telegrams or letters.

Correction: Many friends called in person to congratulate the new governor; others sent him telegrams or letters.

If the ideas are closely related to form a unit and if the second clause illustrates or explains the first clause, the comma may be replaced by a colon.

*Comma fault: Martha and Betty are interested in science, they are both majoring in chemistry.

Correction: Martha and Betty are interested in science: they are both majoring in chemistry.

If the first clause asks a question and the second clause answers it, the comma should be replaced by a question mark.

*Comma fault: Why does a person mistreat his dog at the end of the day, he is using the dog as a scapegoat.

Correction: Why does a person mistreat his dog at the end of a strenuous day? He is using the dog as a scapegoat.

If a coordinating conjunction can clarify the relationship of ideas, the conjunction should be added.

*Comma fault: My alarm clock is my worst enemy, it is also my best friend.

Correction: My alarm clock is my worst enemy, but it is also my best friend.

If the comma fault occurs before a conjunctive adverb, the comma should be replaced by a semicolon.

*Comma fault: He knew Norwegian customs from having been among the Norwegian friends, furthermore, he had once lived in Norway.

Correction: He knew Norwegian customs from having been among the Norwegian friends; furthermore, he had once lived in Norway.

If the idea of one clause clearly depends on that of the other clause, subordination should be used.

*Comma fault: The kitten sees herself in a mirror, she appears puzzled.

Correction: The kitten appears puzzled whenever (because, etc.) she sees herself in a mirror.