Fragments and Run-Ons

What is a sentence fragment?
Sentence fragments are phrases that lack one of the two necessary components for a complete sentence: a subject or a verb. A fragment may also be a clause that has a subject and a verb, but that begins with a subordinating word (like although, because, since, that, than, if, when, where, why, though, bow, or unless). A clause that begins with a subordinating word is called a subordinate clause, and it can only function within other sentences.

Simple examples: out of context, fragments can be easy to spot.

Waiting in line at the Help Desk. (no subject)
Many students. (no verb)
Until a computer was available. (subordinate clause)

Harder examples: fragments are more difficult to identify when they follow a complete sentence in context or resemble conversational speech. Note how the second “sentence” in each of these examples logically belongs with the sentence before it, even though they “sound” right.

I saw two of my classmates at the Help Desk. One from my economics and one from my biology lab.
It will be a miracle. If I finish typing my paper tonight.
At least I’ve already planned the major parts. For example, the thesis, body paragraphs, and evidence.

How to Correct a Sentence Fragment
The easiest way to get rid of a fragment is to connect it to a complete sentence, usually either the one before or the one after it, changing the punctuation accordingly. The revised versions of the previous examples could read as follows:

Many students were waiting in line at the Help Desk until a computer was available.
I saw two of my classmates at the Help Desk: one from my economics class and one from my biology lab.
If I finish typing my paper tonight, it will be a miracle.
At least I’ve planned the major parts—for example, the thesis, body paragraphs, and supporting evidence.

Another way to correct a sentence fragment is to turn it into a separate complete sentence.

I saw two of my classmates at the Help Desk. One is in my economics class and the other is in my biology lab.

Be aware that some subjects are understood rather than implicitly stated. Sentences with these types of subjects are still complete sentences. For example, the following sentence is a command where the subject is understood to be “you.”

Please be quiet so I can concentrate.

Adapted from resources created by the University Writing Center at The University of Texas at Austin (uw.c.utexas.edu) and the Center for Writing at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities (writing.umn.edu)
What is a Run-on Sentence?

A run-on sentence is the flip side of a fragment – a sentence where two independent clauses (complete sentences) are joined incorrectly. Run-on sentences are grammatically incorrect and tend to make writing confusing and unwieldy. There are two types of run-on sentences: comma splices and fused sentences.

A comma splice occurs when two or more independent clauses are joined only by a comma.

My cat meowed, I knew she wanted food.

I rushed out the door, leaving my lunch on the counter, now I have nothing to eat.

Many famous authors have lived in Minnesota, examples include Sinclair Lewis, Laura Ingalls Wilder, and Louise Erdrich.

A fused sentence occurs when independent clauses run together with no marks of punctuation or coordinating conjunctions to separate them.

My professor read my paper she said it was excellent.

My cat bites me she wants to play.

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How to Correct a Run-on Sentence

There are many ways to correct a run-on sentence. The method you choose will depend on the focus and flow of your paper.

Use a semicolon (or, in some cases, a colon or a dash). You can use a semicolon alone or with a transitional expression (however, therefore, in contrast, etc.).

I rushed out the door, leaving my lunch on the counter; now I have nothing to eat.

My cat meowed; therefore, I knew she wanted food.

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Use a comma and a coordinating conjunction (and, but, yet, so, nor, for). When you join two independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction, place a comma before the conjunction.

My professor read my paper, and she said it was excellent.

My cat meowed, so I knew she wanted food.

Separate the independent clauses into sentences. This is an especially good technique if one of the sentences is long – otherwise, the result can sound choppy.

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I rushed out the door, leaving my lunch on the counter. Now I have nothing to eat.

Restructure the sentence to subordinate one of the clauses. If one of the sentences is less important than the other, you can turn it into a subordinate clause. Sometimes, all this takes is the addition of a subordinating word like although, that, when, etc. Other times, you may need to restructure the whole sentence.

My cat bites me when she wants to play.

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