



Welcome to the re-introduction of a favorite feature on good legal writing. If there are writing topics you'd like to see covered, write to arizona.attorney@azbar.org

What the Heck is a Comma Splice? (or, "Semicolon to the Rescue!")

Most of us, and especially those of us who spend time thinking about writing, have our writing-related pet peeves. Many of mine relate to punctuation. It seems like such a small thing, but, as I wrote in my April column on the Oxford comma, punctuation signals rhythm, and an errant or missing piece of punctuation can be as jarring as a bass player who's a millisecond off beat. Sometimes architecture provides the better analogy: Adequate punctuation supports a structurally sound sentence. Most of my students know, for example, that final commas or periods outside quotation marks bother me; not only does this usage violate American style rules, but the poor, untethered comma just *looks* awkward and insecure floating out there all alone.

Another of my pet peeves—the comma splice—also falls under the “poor construction” category of punctuation problems. What is a comma splice? It's where the writer “splices” two independent clauses with only a comma, creating a run-on sentence. For example:

- Kevin's strategy worked, the other side decided to settle.
- Phoebe bolted through the door, she was tired of Moose harassing her.
- Plaintiff's claims fail as a matter of law, therefore summary judgment is appropriate.¹

Each sentence contains two independent clauses, each of which could stand alone as a separate complete sentence. The humble comma—a weaker form of punctuation than a period or a semicolon—lacks the heft to join those two clauses on its own, so the connection fractures. String together a number of these run-on sentences, and your reader feels like you're rambling. And, of course, a style stickler will recognize the usage error.

How do you cure a comma splice? You have several options:


1. Create two separate sentences: “Phoebe bolted through the door. She was tired of Moose harassing her.”
2. Make one of the clauses dependent by beginning it with a subordinating conjunction (some of the most common subordinating conjunctions are *after*, *although*, *because*, *unless*, *until*, *where*, *though*, and *while*): “Because plaintiff's claims fail as a matter of law, summary judgment is appropriate.”
3. Supplement the comma with a coordinating conjunction (like *for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, or *so* ... also known by the mnemonic “FANBOYS”): “Kevin's strategy worked, and the other side decided to settle.”
4. I usually solve a comma splice by deploying my favorite piece of punctuation, the semicolon: “Plaintiff's claims fail as a matter of law; therefore, summary judgment is appropriate.”

Which option you choose depends on the meaning you want to convey and on subtler rhetorical considerations. If you want to demonstrate a causal relationship, perhaps option two is the best choice. To capture your reader's attention and truly emphasize a point after a series of longer sentences, maybe using two short, declarative sentences in a row is the right

strategy. Often we create comma splices because two thoughts are so intertwined that they seem to belong in the same sentence; that may be the place for a semicolon.

Why do we see so many comma splices, even from otherwise-solid legal writers?

First, most people have heard the term “comma splice,” but far fewer know what it actually means. Second, comma splices are everywhere, and using them starts to feel acceptable. My book club read Margaret Atwood's otherwise beautifully written *The Handmaid's Tale* recently, and virtually every page included a comma splice. Although I suspect that Atwood made a deliberate stylistic decision to join independent clauses with weaker punctuation (perhaps to underline her narrator's inertia), we legal writers enjoy less latitude—and, frankly, have less reason—to deviate from basic principles of grammar and style. Our readers are less likely to debate our motivations over wine and cheese and more likely to assume that we just don't know the rules.

Let's face it: Lawyers, by vocation, live by rules. We're traditionalists, and we tend to be risk averse. Be creative, but channel that creativity through thoughtful word selection, strategic juxtaposition, or any number of rhetorical devices. Perhaps even start a carefully selected sentence with a conjunction. But risking the structural integrity of a sentence with insufficient punctuation seldom reaps rewards. 

endnotes

1. Most of us recognize that the first two sentences don't feel right. Many, though, might be quite comfortable with the third sentence. Technically it is also run-on sentence, however: “therefore” is a conjunctive adverb, not a coordinating conjunction like “and” or “but.” Coordinating conjunctions are like super glue: they can supplement a less-secure fastener like a comma to create a sound bond. (Admit it: You're picturing a construction worker hanging from his orange safety helmet right now.) Because conjunctive adverbs connect, create transitions, and add meaning, they're more like glue sticks; they serve important functions, but lack the adhesive strength to bolster the comma splice.



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