

Fire-Starter

WHAT IS A SENTENCE?

We are always asking students to self-edit their work for spelling, punctuation, run-on sentences, and the like. (Most students use Word to correct spelling errors, but Word will not pick up sentence fragments or run-on sentences.) Practicing identifying sentences and correcting them when they are either run-ons or fragments is meaningful homework because it is a lifelong skill students need in order to communicate effectively.

Tools

Students' background in grammar varies widely, depending on what they were taught. Some students may have an incomplete understanding of what a sentence is. This makes it hard to know if something is a run-on sentence or a fragment. Here are the basics:

- Sentences must have at least one subject and one verb and express a complete thought. An incomplete sentence is called a *sentence fragment*.
- Take a red marker and highlight the verb (predicate) in the sentence. Take a blue marker and mark the subject, or noun that is doing the action. Does this sentence contain both?

Example: Ran without a problem.

Okay, this has a verb (“ran”). Does this sentence have a subject, or noun that is doing the action? *What* ran?

- A *run-on sentence* is two or more complete sentences incorrectly written as one. The most common is called a *comma splice*, in which two sentences are separated by a comma.
- Read the sentence aloud to yourself and see if you stop at a certain point at the end of an idea. Here is most likely where you need to punctuate with a period and start a new sentence. If you have already used a comma to punctuate, should it be a period? Did you introduce a new idea?

Example: The horse knew it was time to go home, the sun was setting.

Read this aloud to yourself. Did you stop after the word “home”? Does “the sun was setting” introduce a new subject and predicate? How else could you modify this sentence to make it grammatically correct?

Homework Assignment

1. Choose a piece of writing (by yourself or another student) that you think might need work.
2. Check it using both of the above tools to identify sentence fragments or run-on sentences.
3. Correct it.
4. Write several sentences explaining what you discovered about the grammatically incorrect sentences, and what you did to fix them. Describe them using the words *noun, verb, subject, predicate*.