

Troubleshooting: Convention Confusions

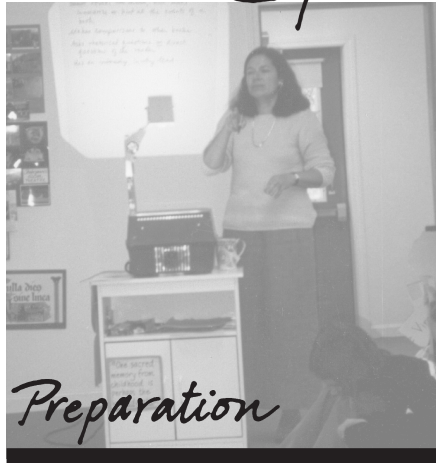
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What I Was Thinking

There are no months indicated for these lessons because I conduct them in response to problems I observe as I edit kids' writing. I keep a blue 4-by6-inch file card in a pocket of the binder where I file my weekly lesson plans. At home at night, when I'm editing student drafts and spot a trouble area, I make a note on the card to plan a new lesson around the confusion or retrieve the file on that convention and update the information and examples. I'd define a lesson-worthy convention confusion as an error or omission that shows up in three or four kids' pieces in the course of two weeks.

The seven lessons included here were mentioned time and again by students as ones for which they were grateful. In my experience, students want conventionality. They want to feel confident about their writing, and they want to be on the inside when it comes to doing things right. As Meg put it, "I knew there was some system for quoting or underlining titles of books, poems, songs, and things, but I could never get it. Now I do. And when I'm not positive, I just look on that page in my handbook to check. It's one of my most-used pages."

How to Correct Comma Splices



- ✓ Overhead transparency of “Correcting Comma Splices”
- ✓ Fine-point overhead marker

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“

Last summer I was cleaning out files at home and came across a folder of papers I’d written in college. It was fun to reread them and try to remember who I was when I wrote them. But it was also discomfiting. I kept finding errors—or, rather, the same error, here, there, and everywhere. Based on what I’ve learned over the years as an editor of writing, I shouldn’t have been surprised. The error I was committing, as a nineteen-year-old, is, for many writers, the last big one to go, the final confusion to be cleared up. Can you guess what it was? . . .

I was connecting my sentences with commas: trying to splice two sentences together by inserting a comma between them. Can someone tell me why this is an error? . . .

As a mark, a comma isn’t strong enough to connect two sentences. Remember what we learned about the origins of the word *comma*, how it comes from a Greek word meaning “little knife”? The Greeks wanted to show that a part of a sentence, a phrase or a clause, had been split but not severed from the whole—a comma’s not a big knife, but a little one.

A comma *is* strong enough to connect groups of words, like phrases and clauses, to sentences, but it’s *not* strong enough to connect two sentences. When a writer attempts to butt two sentences together by inserting a comma between them, the error is called a *comma splice*.

As an editor of your writing, I’m finding comma splices. We’ll focus on

these today to make you aware of what a comma cannot do and to gear you up to start identifying and correcting the Last Big Convention Error.

Please turn to the next clean page in your writing handbook and record this heading:

Correcting Comma Splices

First, let's define a comma splice. Please copy the definition from the overhead transparency: *A comma splice occurs when a writer attempts to hook two sentences together with a comma.*

Here's an example of a comma splice error for you to record in your handbooks: *The clouds are gathering in the west, it will rain soon.*

Now, there's a test to determine whether a construction is a comma splice, or if it's a legal sentence with a comma in it: can the groups of words on either side of the comma stand alone, as complete and sensible sentences? Read aloud with me the words that precede and follow the comma in the first example on the transparency. . . . Yes, they can stand alone as sentences.

So, how do we correct this comma splice? We have some options. What are they? . . . Please record the alternatives in your handbook as I write them on the transparency.

You could make a new sentence: *The clouds are gathering in the west. It will rain soon.*

You could insert a conjunction after the comma: a word that will cement the two sen-

tences into a compound sentence: *The clouds are gathering in the west, and it will rain soon.* Frankly, this is my least favorite solution. Why stick in extra words, when there's punctuation that will make the splice legal and keep the voice?

What I'm thinking is you could also use a semicolon here, which is what I'd do as a writer. This is the mark I didn't know about yet when I was writing papers in college. When I looked closely at the places where I comma-spliced back then, and when I observe your comma splice errors today, I see a pattern: in most cases, there's a relationship between the two sentences we tried to splice together. In other words, I don't think comma splices are an arbitrary error. Writers are trying to do something, but they don't know the right mark. Often, the semicolon is the right mark.

A writer uses a semicolon to connect two sentences *not* connected by

CORRECTING COMMA SPLICES

Definition: A comma splice occurs when a writer attempts to hook two sentences together with a comma.

EXAMPLES:

The clouds are gathering in the west, it will rain soon.

I'm crazy about dogs, English springer spaniels are my favorites.

I dreamed, around me the night shifted and settled.

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Lesson Plan Camp Writers
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CORRECTING COMMA SPLICES LESSON 70

Reproducible

Correcting Comma Splices

and, when he or she wants to show a relationship between the sentences—when there’s a closeness in meaning between them.

So, for example: *The clouds are gathering in the west; it will rain soon.* There’s a relationship here: clouds in the west mean rain. The semi-colon cements the relationship.

A colon is another possibility. Remember how one of the things it does is show a reader that an explanation is coming? *The clouds are gathering in the west: it will rain soon.*

Let’s try another example: *I’m crazy about dogs, English springer spaniels are my favorites.*

First, is it a comma splice? Perform the test aloud with me. . . . Yup. Now, how do we correct it? Let’s record some possibilities.

I’m crazy about dogs. English springer spaniels are my favorites.

I’m crazy about dogs; English springer spaniels are my favorites.

I’m crazy about dogs, but English springer spaniels are my favorites.

Let’s try another. Is this a comma splice? Perform the test with me. . . . *I dreamed, around me the night shifted and settled.*

Yes, this is a comma splice. “I dreamed” is a sentence—a short one, but it does have a subject and a verb, a someone doing something. What are the options for correcting it? Record with me:

I dreamed. Around me the night shifted and settled.

I dreamed; around me the night shifted and settled.

I dreamed, and around me the night shifted and settled.

Observations about comma splices and correcting them? Questions?

Tonight for homework I’d like you to try to find examples of two comma splice errors in pieces of your prose. If you can’t find splices, create two. Write the spliced sentences in your writing handbook, beneath your notes on this lesson. Then, under each splice error, write out two or three alternative versions for correcting it, as we did for the spliced sentences in this lesson.

Questions?

FOLLOW-UP

[The next day, at the end of the mini-lesson, I ask students to pass me their writing handbooks, opened to the page on which they recorded the homework. I check their examples and give a ✓+ if they got the concept; if they didn’t, I correct their attempt and ask them to try another one for homework that night, then I check it the next day.]