

Three common sentence errors and how to remedy these

Sentence errors are due either to a lack of understanding about sentence formation, or a lack of care. The remedy to both is in your hands. Taking care with one's writing is an obvious first step, and we all need to do this. The second step is to be sensitive to how sentences are written, especially those that are written by capable writers. This means you will also concentrate on reading more, and do so with real purpose. As you read these writers, try to gain an appreciation of the **flow** and **balance** and **unity** of each sentence, and **how they combine to flesh out the theme** of each paragraph. If you do this proactively (that is, eagerly), you will find that your capacity to write sound, well-formed sentences will begin to grow, almost without you realising that this is happening. In the meantime, let us look at three common errors found in student papers, and show you how to avoid these. These errors are: run-on sentences; sentence fragments; and overloaded sentences.

1) **Run-on Sentences:** These are sentences that run beyond the point where they should stop and a new sentence begin. Below are three examples of run-on sentences. In each case the run-on element is underlined.

- ⊗ Peter dawdled on his way home he was late for supper.
- ⊗ We cannot find Eva anywhere everyone is worried.
- ⊗ I am enjoying this book it is well-written and interesting.

Run-on sentences are usually resolved by inserting a semicolon, a conjunction, or by writing two sentences.

- ☺ Peter dawdled on his way home; he was late for supper. [Semicolon]
- ☺ We cannot find Eva anywhere; everyone is worried. [Semicolon]
- ☺ I am enjoying this book; it is well-written and interesting. [Semicolon]
- ☺ Peter dawdled on his way home **and** he was late for supper. [Conjunction]
- ☺ We cannot find Eva anywhere **and** everyone is worried. [Conjunction]
- ☺ I am enjoying this book **because** it is well-written and interesting. [Conjunction. You could also use 'for' or 'as.].
- ☺ Peter dawdled on his way home. He was late for supper. [Two sentences]
- ☺ We cannot find Eva anywhere. Everyone is worried. [Two sentences]
- ☺ I am enjoying this book. It is well-written and interesting. [Two sentences]

2) **Sentence Fragments:** A proper sentence has a subject, a finite verb that is linked to that subject, and it presents a complete thought. Thus it can stand alone. While a sentence fragment might include a subject and a verb, it invariably fails to present a complete thought and cannot stand alone. Its full meaning is usually dependent on another sentence, usually the preceding one. Below are three examples of sentence fragments. These are underlined. Notice how the full meaning of each fragment is dependent on the preceding sentence. This preceding sentence can be described as the 'context sentence' because it provides the context in which the fragment can be fully understood.

- ⊗ John is selling his house. Because he wants to move to Brisbane.
- ⊗ Avondale is a privately-owned tertiary college. In the Cooranbong area.
- ⊗ I will do well in the exam. Unless there is a question on bio-ethics.

Sentence fragments are usually resolved by linking them directly with the 'context sentence' as follows:

- ☺ John is selling his house because he wants to move to Brisbane.
- ☺ Avondale is a privately-owned tertiary college in the Cooranbong area.
- ☺ I will do well in the exam unless there is a question on bio-ethics. [Alternatively, you could write the following sentence.]
- ☺ Unless there is a question on bio-ethics, I will do well in the exam. [Notice the comma.]

3) **Overloaded Sentences:** An overloaded sentence is a sentence that tries to cover too much ground and, as a result, staggers along under a load of confusing detail. A good sentence focuses on a single idea and comes directly to the point without wandering all over the place. Below are two examples of overloaded sentences.

- ⊗ Teachers need to realise that the education of a child is a critical undertaking and should be carried out with care and consistency so that the child can gain maximum benefit from each educational episode in order to set a solid foundation for any follow-up teaching, especially during the early years of primary school.
- ⊗ The preparation and delivery of God-filled sermons are arguably the two most important tasks of Christian ministry and these cannot be adequately undertaken unless the minister is fully committed to his or her role as a minister, and at the same time enjoys a rich and fulfilling communion with Christ in order to maintain a vital connection to the very source of truth that should underpin that ministry.

Overloaded sentences can be resolved by re-writing them as two or more sentences, and by being more direct.

- ☺ The teaching of a child in the early primary years is a critical undertaking that should be carried out carefully and consistently. This enables the child to gain maximum benefit from each educational episode, which provides a solid foundation for follow-up teaching. [43 words in three sentences versus 55 words in one sentence.]
- ☺ Two vital tasks of Christian ministry are the preparation and delivery of God-filled sermons. To do this effectively the minister should be fully committed to ministry and enjoy a rich communion with Christ who is the very source of truth that underpins ministry. [44 words in two sentences versus 69 words in one sentence.]