

How to Revise Run-on Sentences

What Is a Run-on?

Bear with me for a minute while I build up to the answer.


A subject and verb showing tense are together called a “clause.” A complete sentence has at least one “independent clause” because it has enough information to make sense on its own, without adding other clauses. When a sentence contains multiple independent clauses, the sentence structure needs punctuation and connecting words to avoid making a run-on sentence.

A run-on sentence is **not** just a long sentence. If it is punctuated and structured correctly, a sentence can be quite long. However, a run-on can be confusing or even accidentally say something you didn’t mean, so adding punctuation according to the sentence structure can help keep things clear for everyone.

A run-on is two or more independent clauses put together without effective punctuation.

Types of Run-on Sentences (What to Look for and What Not to Do!):


1. **Classic Run-ons**—two or more complete clauses **with no punctuation** between them:

Ballet is a classical form of dance it has been performed for centuries. 

I'm going to see my mother's cat she had kittens. 

2. **Comma Splices**—a comma alone between the complete clauses is not enough:

Ballet is a classical form of dance, it has been performed for centuries. 

I'm going to see my mother's cat, she had kittens. 

So how do we revise a run-on sentence?


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Revising Run-ons

Three Main Ways

When two clauses are complete, they can be punctuated in three main ways:

1. **Period [.]**—A period is placed between the two independent clauses to form two sentences. Periods make a hard break between the subjects and may make pronouns harder to understand.

Ballet is a classical form of dance. It has been performed for centuries. 

I'm going to see my mother's cat. She had kittens. 

- The period goes between the two independent clauses.
- Remember to capitalize the first word after the period.


2. **Comma + FANBOYS** [*For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So*] also known as “coordinating conjunctions” to relate the clauses to each other:


*Ballet is a classical form of dance, **and** it has been performed for centuries.* 

*My mother's cat had kittens, **so** I'm going to visit and choose one.* 

3. **Semicolon [;]**—A semicolon goes between two independent clauses that are closely related. It keeps the clauses together as one sentence and can be used with or without a transitional word or phrase:

Ballet is a classical form of dance; it has been performed for centuries.

Ballet has been performed for centuries; as a result, it is called a “classical” form of dance. 

I'm going to see my mother's cat; she had kittens. 

- DO NOT capitalize the next word after the semicolon.
- A transition word or phrase is possible, but not required.
- Use semicolons sparingly – only once or twice per page.

More Ways to Revise Run-ons

Subordinators and Subordinating Clauses

You can turn one of the clauses into background description for the main part of the sentence by adding a *subordinator*, for example *when*, *as*, *since*, or *while*:

Since *my mother doesn't want to keep the kittens, I'm going to choose one.*

- When you add a **subordinator** to a clause, it becomes a *subordinate clause*. Now, “since my mother doesn’t want to keep the kittens” needs an independent clause to join with it to make a complete sentence.

Punctuation: Do I add a comma or not?

If the *independent clause* comes *first*, **do not** add a comma:

I need to go to the store since I'm out of dishwashing soap.

independent clause subordinate clause

If the independent clause comes *second*, **do** add a comma:

Since I'm out of dishwashing soap, I need to go to the store.

subordinate clause independent clause

Common Subordinators

after	although	as long as	as soon as	as though	as/as if
because	before	even if	even though	hence	if
in case	since	so that	unless	until	when
whenever	where	wherever	whether	which	while

Goal: Be clear

Sometimes it's better to make sentences shorter, rather than adding more words or punctuation, to make a sentence clear.

- Break up the run-on into smaller, simpler sentences.
- Eliminate repetitive or unnecessary words.
- Try to say it in fewer words.

Here's an example of this kind of revision:

1st Draft: To make brownies, first get a bowl out of the cupboard and a wooden spoon and two eggs, and the brownie mix and preheat the oven; after preheating the oven, empty the mix into the bowl and crack two eggs and stir it carefully, not too fast.

Revision: To make brownies, first get a bowl ~~out of the cupboard and~~[,] a wooden spoon[,] ~~and~~ two eggs, and the brownie mix[,] ~~and preheat the oven;~~ [A]fter preheating the oven, empty the mix into the bowl and ~~crack two~~ add the eggs[,] ~~and~~ stir it carefully[,] ~~not too fast.~~

Final: To make brownies, first get a bowl, a wooden spoon, two eggs, and the brownie mix. After preheating the oven, empty the mix into the bowl and add the eggs. Stir it carefully.

Note: these revisions may be different from yours, and that's okay.

When it comes to writing, there are many possibilities!

General Tips to Avoid Run-Ons:

- If you get lost as you're reading the sentence, so will your audience.
- Look for each subject and verb, and make sure two or more connected clauses have a subordinator and comma, or a comma and one of the FANBOYS, depending on how you want to connect them.
- If you're not sure if you have a run-on, play it safe and separate the clauses with a period until you feel more confident about how to revise them.