



The Writing Center

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO
DENVER | ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS

Avoiding Comma Splices

A comma splice occurs when a writer places a comma by itself between two complete sentences. A complete sentence has a subject and a verb; it can stand alone as a complete idea. If a comma is used incorrectly between two sentences, readers cannot tell where one thought ends and another begins.

Comma Splice: Whales are the largest mammals, they can be up to 95 feet long.

Notice that there is a complete sentence on either side of the comma creating a comma splice. As a result, this sentence is incorrect.

Quick Trick:

1. Cover all the words after the comma. Is this a complete sentence?
2. Then cover all the words before the comma. Is this a complete sentence?
3. If both phrases are complete sentences, then you have a comma splice.

1. How to Recognize Comma Splices:

Almost all comma splices are caused by four patterns. Look for these patterns in your own writing to find comma splices:

- A pronoun (I, he, she, it, we, you, they) starts the second part of the sentence.

Comma Splice: Most whales migrate, they travel in pods.

- A conjunctive adverb (however, similarly, therefore, furthermore, then, etc.) starts the second part of the sentence.

Comma Splice: Whales breathe air into their blowholes, then it travels into their lungs.

- A transitional expression (in addition, for example, in contrast, of course, meanwhile) starts the second part of the sentence.

Comma Splice: Whales have the same characteristics as other mammals, for example, they have lungs, hair, a heart, and warm blood.

- The second part of the sentence explains, says more about, contrasts with or gives an example of what is said in the first part.

Comma Splice: Whales are one of only two species of mammals that live in the ocean their entire lives, manatees are also mammals.

2. How to Fix Comma Splices:

There are four basic ways to fix comma splices. Determine which method works best for the idea you are trying to convey:

- Replace the comma with a period.

Incorrect: Most whales migrate, they travel in pods.

Correct: Most whales migrate. They travel in pods.

- Replace the comma with a semicolon.

Incorrect: Whales have the same characteristics as other mammals, for example, they have lungs, hair, a heart, and warm blood.

Correct: Whales have the same characteristics as other mammals; for example, they have lungs, hair, mammary glands, a four chambered heart, and warm blood.

- Add a conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) immediately after the comma.

Incorrect: Whales breathe air into their blowholes, then it travels into their lungs.

Correct: Whales breathe air into their blowholes, and then it travels into their lungs.

- Rewrite one of the phrases so that it is no longer a complete sentence. Then, join the two phrases together with a comma.

Incorrect: Whales are one of the only two species of mammals that live in the ocean their entire lives, manatees are also mammals.

Correct: Other than manatees, whales are the only species of mammals that live in the ocean their entire lives.

For further information on related concepts, please see the following handouts:

- Understanding Commas