

The Big Seven

1. No Comma Splices

What is a comma splice? A comma splice occurs when you join two independent clauses—a word group that could stand alone as a sentence—with a comma:

X-Files is a show about government conspiracies, I watch it every Sunday evening.

The example above is a comma splice.

X-Files is a show about government conspiracies is a complete sentence (independent clause), and *I watch it every Sunday evening* is a complete sentence, and so it is INCORRECT to combine them with a comma.

How to fix comma splices: Instead of using a comma to connect these two complete sentences together, you can do THREE THINGS:

- Use a semicolon

X-Files is a show about government conspiracies; I watch it every Sunday evening.

- Create two sentences

X-Files is a show about government conspiracies. I watch it every Sunday evening.

- Keep the comma but use a coordinating conjunction (FANBOYS - for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so).

X-Files is a show about government conspiracies, and I watch it every Sunday evening.

2. No Run-on Sentences

What is a run-on sentence? A run-on sentence occurs when you run several sentences together in a single sentence:

X-Files is a show about government conspiracies it features two characters, Mulder and Scully, I watch it every Sunday evening.

The example above is a run-on sentence.

X-Files is a show about government conspiracies is a complete sentence (independent clause); *it features two characters, Mulder and Scully* is a complete sentence; *I watch it every Sunday evening* is a complete sentence.

How to fix run-on sentences:

- Separate the three sentences: X-Files is a show about government conspiracies. It features two characters, Mulder and Scully. I watch it every Sunday evening.
- If you do not want to create simple sentences that sound like “See Dick run. See Jane play,” then think about using coordinating conjunctions (FANBOYS) to connect the sentences:

X-Files is a show about government conspiracies, and it features two characters, Mulder and Scully. I watch it every Sunday evening.

3. Always Use a Comma Before the Coordinating Conjunctions (FANBOYS) When They Combine Two Sentences: (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so)

X-Files is a show about government conspiracies, and it features two characters, Mulder and Scully.

X-Files is a show about government conspiracies is a complete sentence, *and it features two characters, Mulder and Scully* is a complete sentence. However, because you are combining these two complete sentences together with an *and*, a comma must be placed before the *and*.

4. Always Use a Comma After Introductory or Subordinating Clauses (remember, time or condition):

When I watch the X-Files, I always make a big tub of buttery popcorn.

When I watch the X-Files is an introductory clause; it introduces the complete sentence that follows: *I always make a big tub of buttery popcorn*. Other introductory clauses include the following examples: *Yesterday*, *Because a weasel is wild*, *During the Vietnam War*, and *In my opinion*. You can tell if a clause is an introductory clause if it discusses time or condition:

Time = When I went to the store,

Condition = Because a weasel is wild,

5. Only Use a Semicolon Between Two Complete Sentences, and Between Two Sentences That Relate to Each Other:

X-Files is a show about government conspiracies; almost every episode involves some sort of espionage against the human race.

X-Files is a show about government conspiracies is a complete sentence. *Almost every episode involves some sort of espionage against the human race* is a complete sentence. Therefore, a semicolon is appropriate here. In addition, the two sentences relate to each other: *almost every episode involves some sort of espionage against the human race* actually clarifies to what degree X-Files is a show about government conspiracies.

6. Use Colons in the Following Circumstances:

- To signal the use of an appositive

Three committees were set up to plan the convention: program, finance, and local arrangements.

- To clarify or add detail by connecting two complete sentences

Rats and rabbits, to those who injected, weighed and dissected them, were little different from cultures in a petri dish: they were just things to manipulate and observe.

- To clarify or to add detail by creating a list (in this case, think of the colon as a pair of binoculars zooming in on the detail)

Today, I went to the store and bought three things: soap, milk, and doggie treats.

A modern car consists of the following major sections: engine, body, and interior.

7. Avoid the Passive Voice

Standard English sentence structure follows the subject, verb, object (SVO) format. In most cases, you should write clear sentences following this structure with your dependent clauses and modifiers stemming off this SVO framework. Passive sentences either lack a subject or place the subject at the end of the independent clause. Therefore, passive voice comes in two varieties: passive voice, and passive construction.

Passive Voice: Mistakes were made.

Who made the mistakes? Politicians love to use this type of sentence because it deflects responsibility. The sentence also sounds awkward.

How to fix passive voice: Remember to follow the SVO format: I made mistakes.

Passive Construction: Mistakes were made by the Pentagon.

This sentence is also awkward.

How to fix passive construction: Remember to follow the Bottom Line Up Front (BLUF) strategy: The Pentagon made mistakes.

Some forms of scientific writing will require you to use the passive voice when, for example, experiments are more important than the researcher. Always consider your audience and the goals and genre of your document before writing.

The measurements were taken on Thursday 20 October at 1700.