

Comma Splices

A comma splice occurs when a writer places a comma by itself between two complete sentences (a complete sentence has a subject, verb, and 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 on earth, 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: Cover the second part of the sentence (all the words that come after the comma). Can this phrase stand as a complete sentence on its own? Then cover the first part of the sentence (all the words that come before the comma). Is this phrase a complete sentence? If both phrases are complete sentences, then you have a comma splice, which means you need to revise the sentence.

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 (he, she, it, we, they) starts the second part of the sentence (i.e. the part of the sentence that comes after the comma).

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

- A conjunctive verb (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 mammal 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.

No: Most whales migrate, they travel in pods.

Yes: Most whales migrate. They travel in pods.

- Replace the comma with a semicolon.

No: Whales have the same characteristics as other mammals, for example, they have lungs, hair, a heart, and warm blood.

Yes: 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.

No: Whales breathe air into their blowholes, then it travels into their lungs.

Yes: 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.

No: Whales are one of the only two species of mammals that live in the ocean their entire lives, manatees are also mammals.

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