Run-on Sentences

1. Introduction

Clear sentence boundaries are essential in formal writing. A common mistake at Level 2 is the run-on sentence, when two or more complete sentences are incorrectly joined.

This lesson explains:

- what run-on sentences are
- why they cause problems
- the different types
- how to correct them
- practice activities for learners

2. What is a Run-on Sentence?

A **run-on sentence** happens when a writer joins two or more **independent clauses** incorrectly.

An **independent clause** is a complete idea:

✔ The train was delayed.
✔ We arrived at college late.

A run-on sentence happens when those complete ideas are pushed together without proper grammar:

The train was delayed we arrived at college late.
The train was delayed, we arrived at college late.

Both of these are **incorrect** — but for different reasons.

Sentence 1:

The train was delayed we arrived at college late.

This is a fused sentence (two sentences pushed together with no punctuation).

There are **two complete ideas**:

- The train was delayed.
- We arrived at college late.

Grammar requires punctuation to show where one sentence ends.

Sentence 2:

The train was delayed, we arrived at college late.

This is a comma splice.

A comma **cannot** join two independent clauses by itself.

Any of the following is correct:

Use a full stop (most common)

The train was delayed. We arrived at college late.

Use a conjunction

The train was delayed, **so** we arrived at college late.

Use a semicolon (formal writing)

The train was delayed; we arrived at college late.

Remember

One complete idea = one sentence.
If there are two complete ideas, you must use:

- a full stop
- a conjunction
- or a semicolon

But never a comma on its own.

Run-on sentences occur when writers:

- forget punctuation
- misuse commas
- choose the wrong linking word
- write without deciding whether to stop
- add incorrect grammar such as *should to* or *must to*

3. Why Run-on Sentences Are a Problem

Run-on sentences can seriously reduce the quality of writing. They confuse the reader because ideas are not clearly separated, making it difficult to follow the writer's meaning. They also disrupt the logic and flow of the text, so connections between ideas become unclear. In addition, run-on sentences weaken the overall academic tone, making the writing appear uncontrolled or careless, and they can lead to lost marks for sentence accuracy in formal assessment contexts.

4. Types of Run-on Sentences

A. Comma splice

Problem: two sentences joined with only a comma.

- The bus was late, I missed the meeting.

Rule: A comma cannot join independent clauses. Use:

- full stop: The bus was late. I missed the meeting.
- conjunction: The bus was late, so I missed the meeting.
- semicolon (closely linked ideas): The bus was late; I missed the meeting.

B. Fused sentence (no punctuation)

Problem: She finished her homework she went to work.

Rule: sentences must have clear punctuation.

Correct: She finished her homework. She went to work.

C. Wrong modal verbs (should to / must to)

Problem: Students should to check their answers they must to submit on time.

Rule: modal verbs are followed by the base verb (no *to*):

Correct: Students should check their answers. They must submit on time.

D. Wrong use of conjunctions (and/because/so)

Problem: I was tired and I went home I slept straight away.

Rule: conjunctions join clauses **inside** sentences, but only when the structure is correct.

Correct: I was tired, so I went home. I slept straight away.

E. Linking adverbs used incorrectly (however / therefore / nevertheless)

Problem: The printer broke, however the technician repaired it.

Rule: linking adverbs do not join clauses. They require punctuation.

Correct: (1): The printer broke. However, the technician repaired it.
                (2): The printer broke; however, the technician repaired it.

F. Confusing Oxford comma use

Problem: We invited the principal, the teachers, and the meeting started late.

Rule: The Oxford comma is optional but must not create ambiguity. In British English, we must not put a comma before the last 'and' in a list.

Correct: We invited the principal and the teachers. The meeting started late.

Confusion: It looks as though the "meeting" is part of the list.

G. Over-long continuous sentences

Problem: I wanted to finish my report I stayed late I was tired I made mistakes.

Rule: one idea per sentence (unless clearly linked).

Correct: I wanted to finish my report, so I stayed late. I made mistakes because I was tired.

H. Incorrect punctuation and capitalisation

Problem: the teacher was late, and the students thought the lesson was cancelled.

Rule: new sentences begin with capitals and need correct punctuation.

Correct: The teacher was late. The students thought the lesson was cancelled.

5. Eight Model Paragraphs

The following are the incorrect and correct versions of 8 short paragraphs. You need to read the wrong version and highlight the mistakes. Afterwards, read the corrected version and see whether you correctly identified the errors. Discuss your answer with the teacher.

Paragraph 1 — Comma splices

Run-on paragraph

I submitted my work on time, the tutor could not find it in the system, I phoned the helpdesk, nobody answered, my friend checked her account, she had the same problem, we sent an email, the reply did not come, the deadline was close, everyone felt stressed, the tutor spoke to IT, they promised to investigate, we waited for news, nothing changed all morning, in the afternoon the system refreshed, my file suddenly appeared.

Corrected paragraph

I submitted my work on time, but the tutor could not find it in the system. I phoned the helpdesk, but nobody answered. My friend checked her account, and she had the same problem. We sent an email, but the reply did not come. The deadline was close, so everyone felt stressed. The tutor spoke to IT, and they promised to investigate. We waited for news, but nothing changed all morning. In the afternoon, the system refreshed, and my file suddenly appeared.

Paragraph 2 — Fused sentences

Run-on paragraph

We discussed the new plan it still needs approval, the meeting ended some people had questions, the notes were shared nobody read them carefully, the manager explained the changes some staff disagreed, we asked for support there was not enough time, the deadline arrived everyone rushed their work, several mistakes appeared nobody admitted them, the project moved forward the problems remained.

Corrected paragraph

We discussed the new plan, but it still needs approval. The meeting ended, and some people had questions. The notes were shared, but nobody read them carefully. The manager explained the changes, yet some staff disagreed. We asked for support, but there was not enough time. The deadline arrived, so everyone rushed their work. Several mistakes appeared, and nobody admitted them. The project moved forward, but the problems remained.

Paragraph 3 — Modal verbs

Run-on paragraph

Learners should to read the instructions they must to follow them carefully, writers should to plan their ideas they must to organise paragraphs, students should to proofread their work they must to correct punctuation, candidates should to manage their time they must to finish the exam, teams should to meet regularly they must to share information, tutors should to give feedback they must to support progress, speakers should to prepare notes they must to practise their timing, everyone should to take responsibility they must to improve accuracy.

Corrected paragraph

Learners should read the instructions, and they must follow them carefully. Writers should plan their ideas, and they must organise paragraphs. Students should proofread their work, and they must correct punctuation. Candidates should manage their time, and they must finish the exam. Teams should meet regularly, and they must share information. Tutors should give feedback, and they must support progress. Speakers should prepare notes, and they must practise their timing. Everyone should take responsibility, and they must improve accuracy.

Paragraph 4 — Wrong conjunctions

Run-on paragraph

I was tired and I went home I slept straight away, the class was noisy so I moved seats I still could not hear, the teacher explained the task and some learners ignored it, we arrived early because the bus was fast we waited a long time, the printer failed and the lesson stopped everyone complained, the group worked slowly so the task was unfinished the tutor was worried, he forgot his notes because he rushed out he felt embarrassed, the presentation ended and people left the room they talked outside.

Corrected paragraph

I was tired, so I went home, and I slept straight away. The class was noisy, so I moved seats, but I still could not hear. The teacher explained the task, but some learners ignored it. We arrived early because the bus was fast, but we waited a long time. The printer failed, so the lesson stopped, and everyone complained. The group worked slowly, so the task was unfinished, and the tutor was worried. He forgot his notes because he rushed out, and he felt embarrassed. The presentation ended, so people left the room, and they talked outside.

Paragraph 5 — Linking adverbs

Run-on paragraph

The bus was full, however we managed to get on, the class was long, therefore several students lost focus, the meeting ran late, nevertheless everyone stayed, the photocopier stopped, however the technician arrived quickly, the plan seemed risky, therefore the manager hesitated, the timetable changed, however nobody informed us, the weather was bad, nevertheless the match continued, the team worked hard, therefore the results improved.

Corrected paragraph

The bus was full; however, we managed to get on. The class was long; therefore, several students lost focus. The meeting ran late; nevertheless, everyone stayed. The photocopier stopped; however, the technician arrived quickly. The plan seemed risky; therefore, the manager hesitated. The timetable changed; however, nobody informed us. The weather was bad; nevertheless, the match continued. The team worked hard; therefore, the results improved.

Paragraph 6 — Oxford comma confusion

Run-on paragraph

We invited the principal, the teachers, and the meeting started late, the school welcomed parents, governors, and questions were answered, the children visited the library, the museum, and part of the tour was cancelled, the manager trained the staff, the supervisors, and the safety rules were discussed, the chef prepared soup, salad, and the oven broke halfway, the tutor checked spelling, punctuation, and the essay was submitted, the charity collected food, clothes, and the van became full, the college painted classrooms, corridors, and the work finished late.

Corrected paragraph

We invited the principal and the teachers, and the meeting started late. The school welcomed parents and governors, and questions were answered. The children visited the library and the museum, but part of the tour was cancelled. The manager trained the staff and the supervisors, and the safety rules were discussed. The chef prepared soup and salad, but the oven broke halfway. The tutor checked spelling and punctuation, and the essay was submitted. The charity collected food and clothes, and the van became full. The college painted classrooms and corridors, but the work finished late.

Paragraph 7 — Over-long chains of ideas

Run-on paragraph

I wanted to finish my report I stayed late at work, I felt tired I made mistakes, the office was quiet the deadline was stressful, I checked my figures something looked wrong, I emailed my colleague she did not reply, I corrected the table the numbers still looked strange, I saved the document the computer crashed, I restarted the system the report disappeared.

Corrected paragraph

I wanted to finish my report, so I stayed late at work. I felt tired, and I made mistakes. The office was quiet, but the deadline was stressful. I checked my figures, and something looked wrong. I emailed my colleague, but she did not reply. I corrected the table, yet the numbers still looked strange. I saved the document, but the computer crashed. I restarted the system, and the report disappeared.

Paragraph 8 — Capitalisation and punctuation

Run-on paragraph

the class began quietly the teacher arrived late, some students whispered others waited patiently, the door opened everyone looked up, the teacher apologised the traffic was bad, the lesson continued there were few questions, the projector failed the slides could not be shown, the class worked in groups time passed quickly, the bell rang people packed their bags.

Corrected paragraph

The class began quietly, and the teacher arrived late. Some students whispered, while others waited patiently. The door opened, and everyone looked up. The teacher apologised, because the traffic was bad. The lesson continued, but there were few questions. The projector failed, so the slides could not be shown. The class worked in groups, and time passed quickly. The bell rang, and people packed their bags.

6. Final Practice

Rewrite the paragraphs, fixing punctuation, grammar, and sentence boundaries.

Practice Paragraph 1

The college organised a careers fair and it was very busy many students arrived early some teachers tried to control the crowd but nobody listened the employers were waiting they brought leaflets and gifts for the students everyone wanted to speak to the NHS stand the queue became longer some learners pushed forward the security guard came he spoke politely people continued moving the manager warned the group they needed to behave the event continued smoothly in the afternoon many students felt tired they stayed until closing time they wanted more advice.

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Practice Paragraph 2

Our team started the project late we did not have enough information the leader sent an email and everyone ignored it the deadline was close we worked quickly we did not check our work there were spelling mistakes and punctuation problems the client was not happy they asked for changes we felt stressed we stayed after class to fix everything it was difficult we learned that we should to plan better next time and we must to finish earlier.

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Practice Paragraph 3

The weather changed suddenly it was sunny in the morning people wore light clothes and they went to the park by lunchtime it started raining heavily nobody had umbrellas the children continued playing they became soaked parents tried to call them their phones got wet families ran to the car park the exit was crowded some drivers became angry they shouted others waited calmly the rain stopped everyone was tired they decided to go home.

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