

Rambling Sentences:

A Skill Sheet

Rambling sentences are a common problem, but they are also a very short-lived problem; for once a writer knows how to identify and eliminate them, they rarely (if ever) occur again. Rambling sentences are characteristic of very young writers (ages K-6), but sometimes spill over into the higher grades as well. But, as we said before, it doesn't take much to show someone how to fix a rambling sentence, and it is equally as easy to teach someone how to avoid generating a run-on sentence in the first place.

A rambling sentence may be defined as *any sentence that is exceedingly long, and contains too many independent clauses*. An independent clause is nothing more than a complete, independent thought. It makes sense, then, that rambling sentences tend to contain **coordinating conjunctions** (i.e. *and, but, for, or, nor, so, and yet*), or **words that connect independent thoughts to one another**. Rambling sentences typically confuse readers, and often leave them out of breath if they're reading aloud.

The purpose of a sentence is to state a single idea or a small set of related ideas; a rambling sentence states many ideas, most of which have nothing to do with one another.

Rambling sentences are often confused with sentences that contain comma splices.

It is true that rambling sentences often contain comma splices, but the presence of a comma splice does not necessarily mean that the sentence in question is a rambling sentence. The following examples will help explain. Note that the coordinating conjunctions (which are characteristic of *rambling sentences*) are in **bold print**.

Example One: *Sentence containing a Comma Splice*

I saw a bear lumbering through the woods, it was crashing and thrashing through the brush.

Example Two: *Sentence containing three Comma Splices*

I saw a bear lumbering through the woods, the air smelled like pine, as I listened I could hear him breathing, he was giant.

Example Three: *Rambling Sentence*

I saw a bear lumbering through the woods, **and** the air smelled like pine, **but** as I listened I could hear him breathing, **and** he was giant.

Example Four: *Rambling sentence containing one Comma Splice*

I saw a bear lumbering through the woods, **and** the air smelled like pine, **but** then as I listened I could hear him breathing, he was giant.

Because of the similarities between these two errors, the reasons provided under Explanation of the Problem will seem very similar to the reasons stated on the lesson on comma splices. The primary difference has to do with the fact that rambling sentences are created by coordinating conjunctions, while sentences containing comma splices are created (obviously) by commas.

Explanation of the Problem:

Rambling sentences appear in people's writing for one simple reason - writers feel compelled to join related thoughts together by using coordinating conjunctions. The reason why some writers feel compelled to join independent clauses together is because they have come to learn that thoughts of a similar manner should somehow be linked. Think about it: paragraphs are nothing more than groups of related sentences; and although sentences are supposed to express one single thought, they often include a lot of *related* details. It is the tendency of young writers to want to group related thoughts and details together that creates rambling sentences.

Most writers understand that unrelated thoughts must be separated from one another. Evidence for such understanding may be seen in the widespread use of comma splices, and in the fact that writers who create rambling sentences use coordinating conjunctions to separate long strings of independent clauses.

When a writer chooses to use coordinating conjunction after coordinating conjunction to combine what *should* be separate sentences, the result is almost always a rambling sentence. The following example will help explain.

The other day I went to Grandma's house and when I was there I ate cookies and crackers and she gave me some soda and then I went outside to pick apples and I fell and scraped my knee so she brought me back inside and helped me wash it out and it didn't hurt at all.

Note that the tone of the above passage is characteristic of a young child. This is done purposely, for rambling sentences are the preferred speech pattern for young children. When speaking it is perfectly acceptable to use a series of coordinating conjunctions, providing that it isn't excessively long. Children as well as adults use this technique regularly, especially when they are excited. In writing, however, a long series of coordinating conjunctions and independent clauses communicate a similar phenomenon – that is, the speaker is made to appear excited and somewhat unorganized.

It is important to realize that although rambling sentences are, in fact, errors, they are by no means confusing. There is nothing in the example above that would confuse or bewilder a reader. The reason rambling sentences are considered errors is because they

generate a very specific and often destructive tone. A rambling sentence, if it is to be read aloud, must be read with speed. How else could you pronounce it in a single breath? Because our minds are trained to *hear* words as we read them to ourselves, reading a run-on sentence silently to ourselves causes us to speed up. Interestingly, a perfectly valid technique in writing is to control the intensity and speed of a passage by using repeated coordinating conjunctions. The destructiveness occurs when the conjunctions are used to link independent clauses within a passage that does not benefit from having a fast, speedy tone.

How to Fix It:

The solution is simple. Writers must come to realize that it is not acceptable to link a long series of thoughts using a series of coordinating conjunctions. More importantly, it is essential that they realize *why* it is not acceptable to link too many thoughts using a series of coordinating conjunctions. **It is not acceptable because it utterly destroys the intended tone of the passage and replaces it with an excited and unorganized tone.** Consider again the rambling sentence from above.

The other day I went to Grandma’s house and when I was there I ate cookies and crackers and she gave me some soda and then I went outside to pick apples and I fell and scraped my knee so she brought me back inside and helped me wash it out and it didn’t hurt at all.

The writer who wrote the above example is obviously aware that he or she has combined a series of different thoughts; otherwise, there would be no coordinating conjunctions (the words “and” in it at all. **In order to fix the problem, the first thing to do is to take out all the coordinating conjunctions that separate complete, distinct thoughts, and then replace them with periods.** Remember, the seven coordinating conjunctions are *and, but, for, or, nor, so, and yet*. The change is not permanent, but that it is only the first step in revising the passage.

At this point it is important to realize that there are two types of conjunctions: *those that join separate thoughts*, and *those that join objects or actions*. Both types are called *conjunctions*, but it is important to realize the difference between them.

1. The word “and” as a *coordinating conjunction*:

The other day I went to Grandma’s house **and** when I was there I ate cookies and crackers.

2. The word “and” as a *conjunction*:

The other day I went to Grandma's house and when I was there I ate cookies *and* crackers.

If someone were to take the passage from above and transform *all* the coordinating conjunctions into periods *without distinguishing between those that separate complete thoughts and those that separate objects or actions*, the passage would look like this:

The other day I went to Grandma's house. When I was there I ate cookies. Crackers. She gave me some soda. Then I went outside to pick apples. I fell. Scraped my knee. She brought me back inside. Helped me wash it out. It didn't hurt at all.

See the problem?

Having learned the important distinction between the two types of coordinating conjunctions, one can then be sure to replace only those conjunctions which separate complete thoughts. Then, the passage should then look like the following:

The other day I went to Grandma's house. When I was there I ate cookies and crackers. She gave me some soda. Then I went outside to pick apples. I fell and scraped my knee. She brought me back inside and helped me wash it out. It didn't hurt at all.

Once this has been done, the next step is to understand that *some* of the individual sentences (which are also independent clauses, by the way) in the newly formed paragraph were originally dependent upon one another. Specifically, the word "so" in the sentence "I fell and scraped my knee so she brought me back inside and helped me wash it out" tells the reader that the second clause ("She brought me back inside and helped me wash it out") happened as a result of the first one ("I fell and scraped my knee").

The other day I went to Grandma's house. When I was there I ate cookies and crackers, and then she gave me some soda. Then I went outside to pick apples. I fell and scraped my knee, so she brought me back inside and helped me wash it out. It didn't hurt at all.

Having learned how to break rambling sentences into sentences that are more precise and exact, it is important to understand that coordinating conjunctions aren't merely nasty things that should be eliminated from a person's writing. True, too many of them in one sentence can create a grammatical freight train which strings together thought after thought after thought - but it's perfectly acceptable to join two separate thoughts together once in a while. Such a construction, incidentally, is called a *compound sentence*. If you were to take two ordinary sentences and join them together with the word *and* (or *but*, or

for, or *nor*, or *or*, or *yet*), you'd create a perfectly legitimate sentence. The next few examples will help explain.

Example Five:

I stood under the branches of the apple tree. I jumped at the apples, my fingers outstretched.

I stood under the branches of the apple tree, and I jumped at the apples, my fingers outstretched.

Example Six:

At first it wasn't easy. Then I discovered that if I kept my eye fixed firmly on one of the red fruits, I could make one single jump and grab onto it.

At first it wasn't easy, but then I discovered that if I kept my eye fixed firmly on one of the red fruits I could make one single jump and grab onto it.

Example Seven:

She put hydrogen peroxide on it. The liquid bubbled and fizzed.

She put hydrogen peroxide on it, and the liquid bubbled and fizzed.

In order to determine whether or not the two sentences should be linked together to form a compound sentence, we must ask ourselves whether or not such a decision would add to the overall effect of the paragraph. Would combining the two sentences make the passage more cohesive? How would it affect the tone? Would combining the two sentences make the passage sound like we want it to sound? Such questions must be answered by the individual writer. As a general rule, though, no more than two individual sentences should be joined together.

Using coordinating conjunctions to create compound sentences, therefore, is usually a matter of creating and controlling the tone or mood of the sentence. Problems occur when writers try to use them too often, thus creating rambling sentences.

Rambling Sentences: Exercises

Directions: Correct the following rambling sentences. You may eliminate coordinating conjunctions, and you may also use them to create compound sentences. Each sentence should be transformed into at least two smaller, more concise sentences.

1. My friend came over and she said, "Let's play marbles," so we did and then it started to rain so we came inside.

2. He picked up his bag, for it was time to go, and then he grabbed his coat and walked out the door.

5. My mother asked me to go to the store for her, but then she changed her mind and she decided to go herself, for she had several other errands to run and needed to take the car.

6. Three days after the storm the power still hadn't come back on and the streets were still littered with fallen trees and branches, so we had to heat the house with the old wood stove and cook our food from scratch.

7. Out east it rained so much we couldn't play in the yard for a week, for the mud was ankle-deep and the sky was like a giant showerhead that wouldn't stop leaking.

8. After all the fun and laughter had ended, when all but one or two of the lights had been turned off, the backyard seemed strangely empty, and where once a joyous throng had danced and sung, an exhausted silence had settled amid the vacant picnic tables and abandoned folding chairs, for night had fallen and the party had ended.

Solutions to *Rambling Sentences* Exercises

Solutions:

(Note: Several answers are given because answers may vary slightly.)

1. My friend came over. She said, "Let's play marbles." We did. Then it started to rain. We came inside.

1. My friend came over and she said, "Let's play marbles." So we did, and then it started to rain so we came inside.

1. My friend came over. She said, "Let's play marbles," so we did. Then it started to rain so we came inside.

* * *

2. He picked up his bag. It was time to go. Then he grabbed his coat and walked out the door.

2. He picked up his bag, for it was time to go. Then he grabbed his coat and walked out the door.

* * *

3. The puppies romped and rolled. Then they played and pounced. Eventually they became exhausted. They were out of breath. They curled up by the hearth and went to sleep.

3. The puppies romped and rolled, and then they played and pounced. Eventually they became exhausted. They were out of breath, so they curled up by the hearth and went to sleep.

3. The puppies romped and rolled, and then they played and pounced, but eventually they became exhausted. They were out of breath, so they curled up by the hearth and went to sleep.

* * *

4. I saw the shadow move. I froze. Then I started to worry. I made a run for it, sprinting down the street until I came to a telephone booth.

4. I saw the shadow move, so I froze. Then I started to worry, and so I made a run for it, sprinting down the street until I came to a telephone booth.

* * *

5. My mother asked me to go to the store for her. Then she changed her mind. She decided to go herself. She had several other errands to run and needed to take the car.

5. My mother asked me to go to the store for her, but then she changed her mind. She decided to go herself, for she had several other errands to run and needed to take the car.

* * *

6. Three days after the storm the power still hadn't come back on. The streets were still littered with fallen trees and branches. We had to heat the house with the old wood stove and cook our food from scratch.

6. Three days after the storm the power still hadn't come back on and the streets were still littered with fallen trees and branches. We had to heat the house with the old wood stove and cook our food from scratch.

6. Three days after the storm the power still hadn't come back on and the streets were still littered with fallen trees and branches, so we had to heat the house with the old wood stove and cook our food from scratch.

* * *

7. Out east it rained so much we couldn't play in the yard for a week. The mud was ankle-deep. The sky was like a giant showerhead that wouldn't stop leaking.

7. Out east it rained so much we couldn't play in the yard for a week. The mud was ankle-deep, and the sky was like a giant showerhead that wouldn't stop leaking.

7. Out east it rained so much we couldn't play in the yard for a week, for the mud was ankle-deep and the sky was like a giant showerhead that wouldn't stop leaking.

* * *

8. After all the fun and laughter had ended, when all but one or two of the lights had been turned off, the backyard seemed strangely empty. Where once a joyous throng had danced and sung, an exhausted silence had settled amid the vacant picnic tables and abandoned folding chairs. Night had fallen. The party had ended.

* * *

8. After all the fun and laughter had ended, when all but one or two of the lights had been turned off, the backyard seemed strangely empty. Where once a joyous throng had danced and sung, an exhausted silence had settled amid the vacant picnic tables and abandoned folding chairs. Night had fallen, and the party had ended.

* * *

9. While baking bread, Mr. Smith decided to add three times the normal amount of dough. He wanted to make a larger loaf. When he put it in the oven and left the room the dough rose so high and so wide that it quickly filled the oven, forced open the oven door, and oozed out onto the floor. When it reached the pantry Mr. Smith returned and promptly scooped it all up with a snow shovel.
9. While baking bread, Mr. Smith decided to add three times the normal amount of dough, for he wanted to make a larger loaf. When he put it in the oven and left the room the dough rose so high and so wide that it quickly filled the oven, forced open the oven door, and oozed out onto the floor. When it reached the pantry Mr. Smith returned and promptly scooped it all up with a snow shovel.

* * *

10. On the table there were four cakes, a plate of chocolate chip cookies, a basket of muffins, two platters of homemade buttercrunch, and an endless supply of chocolate milk in a tall glass pitcher. I couldn't bring myself to touch any of it. Then everyone started milling around the table grabbing handfuls of this and handfuls of that. Suddenly my appetite came back, stronger than ever. I took hold of a giant chocolate cupcake and took a bite. When the taste hit my tongue I smiled the biggest smile I had ever smiled in my life.
10. On the table there were four cakes, a plate of chocolate chip cookies, a basket of muffins, two platters of homemade buttercrunch, and an endless supply of

chocolate milk in a tall glass pitcher, and yet I couldn't bring myself to touch any of it. Then everyone started milling around the table grabbing handfuls of this and handfuls of that. Suddenly my appetite came back, stronger than ever, so I took hold of a giant chocolate cupcake and took a bite. When the taste hit my tongue I smiled the biggest smile I had ever smiled in my life.