

Keeping the Comma Splice Queen Happy

BY SUZANNE CHERRY

Comma splice: Dr. Cherry is obsessed with correcting comma splices, she claims we will benefit from her obsession.

Comma splice corrected: Dr. Cherry is obsessed with correcting comma splices, but she claims we will benefit from her obsession.

We have here a specimen of a comma splice, a comma fault, a comma blunder; however, you label it, it's bad form and should remain for all time a grammatical no-no. I'll admit it's quirky, but few things set me off like the sight of a puny little comma plunked down in a lame effort to support two independent clauses. What excuse could there be for forcing two sentences together with inadequate punctuation, particularly when alternatives are easy to come by? I've given my students these alternatives for eliminating a comma splice: a period, a semicolon, or a comma-conjunction combination. I used to think that my explanations of these categories would be enough to forever eradicate the comma splice from my students' work. I now realize I was deluding myself.

Lately I've resorted to more visceral teaching methods—a tactile, kinesthetic concept lesson that has made a difference. I bring to class two lengths of electrical wire coated with plastic. I've removed the last inch or so of the plastic coating, exposing the wire. I present the pieces of wire to

the students, and I ask them to think of the wires as pieces of the TV cable that a puppy has chewed through. The problem is that my favorite show will start in five minutes. Whatever shall I do? Usually someone comes up with the idea of sticking the two pieces of bare wire together.

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We do so. I give the wires a gentle pull and they fall back apart. Now what? At this point, someone usually notices the black electrical tape on the desk. We tape them together; this time the gentle pull doesn't separate the wires. I heave a sigh of relief; my television viewing is saved. Should I watch television and forget about the wires, now that the problem is solved? After what's usually a lively debate, we arrive at the conclusion that the wires shouldn't be left taped. The puppy might continue to chew; and this loose connection is a fire hazard. I bring out a collection of electrical connectors, the ones that look like the caps to a pen. Many of the students have seen these.

“Now,” I say often to the accompaniment of multiple groans, “let's turn these wires into sentences.” If we simply splice them together with a comma, the equivalent of a piece of tape, we

create a weak connection, or a comma splice error. What then would be the grammatical equivalent of the electrical connector? Think conjunction—*and, but, or*. Or try a semicolon. Or make two sentences by separating the clauses with a period. All of these show relationships between sentences in a way that the comma, a devise for taping clauses together in a slapdash manner, does not.

The students seem to get it. My little lesson in home repair has resulted in fewer comma splices. But there is a larger lesson here. I've been teaching writing for many years, and I now realize the

more we are able to relate the concepts of writing to “real world” experience, the more successful we will be.

If this is so, then I reasonably expect my students to have their own battles with writing, and I share this with them, as well (although I tell them they cannot, under any circumstances, lay claim to the monarchy that I possess). Like those adorable icons of Southern Kitsch, the Sweet Potato Queens, my students and I learn to take what others may see as a problem and celebrate it. We're making lemonade from lemons or, more in keeping with the splicing lesson, we're taking flying sparks and channeling them into electricity – and that's what keeps this Comma Splice Queen very happy.

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