

Two big gremlins: personification and the comma splice

Deb Doyle

Whatever type of document we're composing, we need to 'make peace' with our readers by making the writing pleasant, effective, alive, clear and enduring. The alternative is to 'make war' with them, albeit not deliberately, by making the writing waffly, ambiguous and ridiculous.

Personification of a concept or an inanimate object and **the comma splice** are two 'gremlins' I immobilise when a client is paying me to add value to a document. I believe that the reader is more important than the writer and that if the message isn't clear on the first read, I – as the bridge between the writer and the reader – must ask myself, *Why not?* and *How can I make this sentence how I'd like to read it?*

PERSONIFICATION: WHAT IS IT?

'Pathos, or the appeal to emotion, means **to persuade an audience by purposely evoking certain emotions to make them feel the way the author wants them to feel**. Authors make deliberate word choices, use meaningful language, and use examples and stories that evoke emotion.'

The personification gremlin is so pervasive in all forms of writing it can be invisible to all but the most trained eye. Here's a personal example:

Sunstroke forced me to miss the ASTC dinner last night.

Here's an example from advertising, in which the product or service is often framed as the 'hero' and given moral capacity:

Stillnox will help you sleep better.

In fiction – novels, short stories, poems and song lyrics – it's 'the pathetic fallacy'. Pathos is to do with the emotions, and a fallacy is a false statement. Two examples would be 'The trees reached their loving arms up to the sun,' and 'The Little White Cloud That Cried'. We know that inanimate things such as trees and clouds can't undertake actions such as loving and crying, but we suspend disbelief because we're engaging with fiction, not non-fiction, and we appreciate the poetic intent.

However, in non-fiction – which encompasses all genres other than fiction and includes technical and business writing – we shouldn't 'personify' a concept or an inanimate object by attributing an emotion or an action to it. Only human and non-human beings can have feelings and do things.



Examples of **personification** in technical writing

The ichris product suite helps you keep every aspect of managing your people in one, easy to use software package.

Robert Elz of the University of Melbourne and Torben Nielsen of the University of Hawaii completed **the connection work that brought** the internet to Australia.

It was a 56 Kbps satellite circuit and **the Australian end used** a Proteon P4100 router.

Figure 4 illustrates the imperatives **the paper will discuss**.

Table 9.1 sets out the cyberspace developments that gave hope in 1995.

The research showed that the WDR45 gene mutates in females only.

'The less screen time the better,' is what **the study will probably indicate**.

This demonstrates that more research is necessary.

The Internet offers us the ability to connect with anyone, anywhere, any time.

These results provide overwhelming evidence of the product's efficacy.

What does **science have to say** about this development?

The findings will come out next year.

The report concluded that more people are adopting a plant-based diet.

Our survey will give you the opportunity to tell us your needs.

The responses to the questionnaire suggest otherwise.

That created a problem.



What is the solution?

Having given a lot of thought to how best to immobilise the personification gremlin, I've come up with the following eight solutions, but please note that the list is not exhaustive:

1. Write about **cause and effect** or a **reason** for doing something, by using words such as ‘cause’, ‘because’, ‘so’, ‘therefore’ ‘led to’, ‘resulted in’ and ‘as a result of’:

Use the ichris product suite to keep every aspect of managing your people in one, easy-to-use software package.

In this example, you, the consumer, are the grammatical subject of the mild command, whereby you benefit from using the ichris product suite.

2. Use ‘neutral’ verbs such as ‘has’, ‘includes’, ‘contains’, ‘comprises’, ‘constitutes’, ‘is composed of’, ‘had’ and ‘influenced’:

Table 9.1 **comprises** the cyberspace developments that gave hope in 1995.

3. Let an animate being do the action via the verb/s:

In the report, **the authors** concluded that more people are adopting a plant-based diet.

4. Use phrases such as ‘according to’, ‘in accord with’, ‘in accordance with’, ‘in agreement with’, ‘conforming to’, ‘in consonance with’, ‘in keeping with’, ‘in the manner of’, and ‘as reported by [in]’:

According to this, more research is necessary.

5. Turn the abstract noun into a common noun:

What do **scientists** have to say about this development?

6. Change the verb to an adjective:

The ichris product suite is **helpful** for keeping every aspect of managing your people in one, easy to use software package.

7. Use the verb ‘be’, ‘is’, ‘am’, ‘are’, ‘was’ or ‘were’:

These results **are** overwhelming evidence of the product’s efficacy.

8. Convert active voice to passive:

Overwhelming evidence of the product's efficacy **is provided** in these results.
The findings **will be published** next year.



What is a 'grammatical clause'?

In grammar, a clause is an entity that has a 'grammatical subject', a 'finite verb' and a 'predicate'.

A clause's **grammatical subject** – not the clause's topic – can be a person, an animal, a thing or an idea:

Will **the participants** discuss the problem of personification?

Most cats love tummy rubs.

Unfortunately, **my keyboard** has to be replaced every six months.

Industry research is the source of the finding.



The **verb** is the part of speech that's to do with action, doing, being or having. A **finite verb** is a verb that's finished and complete in and of itself. Via a clause's or sentence's verb/s we can visualise the action.

Every clause and sentence contains at least one **finite verb**, which is a verb that's finished and complete in and of itself.

Will **the participants** **discuss** the problem of personification? [humans as the subject of a finite-verb pair]

Most cats **love** tummy rubs. [non-human animals as the subject of a finite verb]

Unfortunately, **my keyboard** **has to be replaced** every six months. [a thing as the subject of a finite-verb group]

Industry research **is** the source of the finding. [an idea as the subject of a finite verb]



A clause's predicate is the verb plus everything else, other than the grammatical subject; the meaning is predicated on what happens in the predicate:

Will **the participants** **discuss** the problem of personification?

Most cats **love** tummy rubs.

Unfortunately, my keyboard has to be replaced every six months.

Industry research is the source of the finding.



Whatever type of document we're composing – a report, a list of instructions or an e-mail, for example – we need to use as many verbs as possible so we enable our reader/s to visualise the action and therefore grasp the meaning immediately.

Our reader/s won't be able to visualise the action and grasp the meaning immediately if we attribute an emotion or action of an animate being to a concept or an inanimate object. Albeit inadvertently, we might cause the reader/s to re-read the clause or sentence or to give up reading the paragraph, list or document altogether.

Via the verb/s we choose, we should give the emotion or action to a living being who can feel that emotion or do that thing.

We need to help our reader/s get through the sentence, list, paragraph or document as effortlessly as possible.



Examples of personification, and suggested edits

The following example is from 'Writing for your audience', written by Jason Xiros and published on astc.org.au/post on 10 November 2021. *Note:* After including the example in my presentation and later discovering that Jason was to be an ASTC Conference delegate, I wish to assert that I didn't mean to single him out, because personification is ubiquitous in not only technical and business writing but all genres:

In this example and all subsequent examples of personification, I've placed a 'pipe' (|) between each clause, and please note some of the clauses have a phrase at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of them.

A phrase:

- is extra information about someone or something
- comprises two or more words
- can contain a verb, but the verb isn't finite (finished and complete in and of itself)
- can be at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of a clause.

Examples of phrases

Originally introduced | for use | in aviation and defence,
giving you | the assurance
In the coming months,
of its flu shot
to record lows
Over the next five years,
this bond
By 2030,
Within markets,



Here's the 'technical writing' example I've selected to illustrate personification:

Originally introduced for use in aviation and defence, this provides a framework for unambiguous procedural and maintenance manuals (often targeted at users | where English is not their primary language)

Suggested edit

Originally introduced for use in aviation and defence, this is a framework for unambiguous procedural and maintenance manuals (often targeted at users | whose primary language is not English).



During the conference, I found the following two examples of personification in the ad between the programs for the Tuesday and Wednesday in-person sessions:

Perfectit helps deliver error-free documents. It improves consistency, ensures quality and helps to enforce style guides.

Perfectit lets editors control every change, that documents are the best they can be.

Suggested edits

Editors use Perfectit to help deliver error-free documents, improve consistency, ensure quality and help enforce style guides.

You control every change and are assured that documents are the best they can be.



The following 45 examples of personification are from articles published in the 'Business' section of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, on pages 30 to 34 of the 3 October issue:

ARTICLE 1: ‘Moderna’s “cocktail” a headache for biotech CSL’ **By Emma Koehn**

EXAMPLE 1

Moderna’s promise of combined coronavirus-influenza shot throws down a challenge to Australian biotech giant CSL | as the next heat of the vaccine race threatens to be a ‘disruptor’.

[Suggested edit](#)

In promising a combined coronavirus–influenza shot, Moderna throws down a challenge to Australian biotech giant CSL | as the next heat of the vaccine race becomes a disruptive threat.

EXAMPLE 2

Such a combined shot would present a challenge to CSL . . .

[Suggested edit](#)

The combined shot would be a challenge for CSL . . .

EXAMPLE 3

, while Moderna is expecting data from the phase 3 study of its flu shot in the coming months, | which could pave the way to launching in the next year.

[Suggested edit](#)

In the coming months, Moderna expects to have data from the Phase 3 study of the company’s flu shot, | whereby in the next year, the company could launch the product.

EXAMPLE 4

Bancel said | **influenza shots using** mRNA had several advantages over egg-based vaccines and those grown using the cells of mammals, | because **they can** more easily **adapt** to emerging variants of diseases to **make sure** people have the most targeted protection each year.

Suggested edit

Bancel said | that **influenza shots for which mRNA is used** **have** several advantages over egg-based vaccines and vaccines that are grown from mammals' cells, | because **scientists can** more easily **adapt** the mRNA-based product to emerging disease variants, | whereby **people who are administered it** **have** the most targeted protection each year.

EXAMPLE 5

If Moderna's format of flu shots were to become mainstream, | **that could** well **cut** CSL's competitive edge in the region, he said.

Suggested edit

If Moderna's format of flu shots were to become mainstream, | **CSL's competitive edge in the region could** well **be reduced**, he said.



ARTICLE 2: “It’s batteries, baby:” Forrest fires up green ambitions’

By Peter Milne

EXAMPLE 6

Again, **Forrest's ambitions** are huge, | **wanting to produce** 15 million tonnes of green hydrogen a year by 2030.

Suggested edit

Again, Forrest's ambitions are huge: by 2030, **he wants to be producing** 15 million tonnes of green hydrogen a year.

EXAMPLE 7

Batteries, transmission lines, and electric-powered trucks add to the bill.

Suggested edit

The costs of batteries, transmission lines and electric-powered trucks are additional to the bill.

EXAMPLE 8

It was to cost \$US2.6 billion (\$4 billion) | and start production earlier this year.

Suggested edit

The cost was to be \$US2.6 billion (\$4 billion), | and production was to start earlier this year.

EXAMPLE 9

The oil and gas giant's confidential study reported by *Bloomberg* reached two conclusions: the enormous complexity of the projects and 'human biases' leading to 'over-optimistic plans' that would be approved for funding.

Suggested edit

In the oil and gas giant's confidential study about which a report was published in Bloomberg.com, the researchers reached two conclusions: | that the projects had been enormously complex | and that 'human biases' had led to 'over-optimistic plans' that would be approved for funding.

EXAMPLE 10

'Once management decides | they believe | a project is viable, | it is hard to change their minds,' Haubrich concluded in his 2014 paper.

Suggested edit

Once managers decide | that a project is viable, | their minds are hard to change.



ARTICLE 3: ‘Anarchy in the UK: How bold tax reforms triggered currency crisis’

By Clancy Yeates

EXAMPLE 11

The United Kingdom had barely emerged from a 10-day period of mourning for the Queen | before it was staring down the barrel of a currency crisis last week, as the pound plunged to record lows.

[Suggested edit](#)

Britons had barely emerged from a 10-day period of mourning for the Queen | before they were staring down the barrel of a currency crisis last week, as the pound plunged to record lows.

EXAMPLE 12

The current account measures key transactions between an economy and the world, including imports, exports, and income flows, such as dividends.

[Suggested edit](#)

The current account is a measure of key transactions between an economy and the world, including imports, exports, and income flows such as dividends.

EXAMPLE 13

Markets worried | the tax cuts would push inflation even higher, | because when households get a tax cut | they have more cash to spend.

[Suggested edits](#)

Marketeers worried | that the tax cuts would cause even higher inflation, | because when household members get a tax cut | they have more cash to spend.

Market representatives worried | that the tax cuts would cause even higher inflation, . . .

Within markets, the worry was | that the tax cuts would cause even higher inflation, . . .

Economists worried | that the tax cuts would cause even higher inflation,

EXAMPLE 14

The surge in bond yields threatened to create a crisis in parts of the UK pension system, | because of the role | long-dated bonds play in defined-benefit pension schemes.

Suggested edit

Due to the surge in bond yields, a crisis in parts of the UK's pension system became a threat, | because of the role | that long-dated bonds have in defined-benefit pension schemes.

EXAMPLE 15

But it still works against the central bank's goal of tackling inflation, as AMP chief economist Dr Shane Oliver observes.

Suggested edit

However, it is contrary to the central bank's goal of tackling inflation, as AMP chief economist Dr Shane Oliver observes.

EXAMPLE 16

'... it is hard to avoid the conclusion | that the fiscal easing announced last week will prompt a significant and necessary monetary policy response in November,' Pill said.

Suggested edit

'... the conclusion is hard to avoid | that the fiscal easing announced last week will be a prompt for a significant and necessary monetary policy response in November,' Pill said.

EXAMPLE 17

The rapid change in interest rate expectation has prompted UK banks to pull hundreds of mortgage products from the market | because of difficulties in pricing their interest rates, | and there are predictions of big house price falls.

Suggested edit

The rapid change in interest rate expectation has been a prompt for UK bank managers to pull hundreds of mortgage products from the market | because the managers have difficulty in pricing the banks' interest rates, | and big falls in house prices are predicted.

EXAMPLE 18

The UK market volatility made ripples around the world, causing Australian bond yields to jump last week, | although they have since retreated.

Suggested edit

The UK market volatility caused ripples throughout the world, | whereby Australian bond yields jumped last week, | although the yields have since retreated.

In the original sentence, the antecedent (referent) for the pronoun ‘they’ could be either ‘ripples’ or ‘Australian bond yields’, so the solution is to repeat the correct antecedent.

EXAMPLE 19

. . . because markets are on edge over | how rising interest rates might cause financial problems, | and ‘investors smelled a crisis’.

Suggested edit

. . . because marketeers are on edge over | how rising interest rates might cause financial problems, | and ‘investors smelled a crisis’.

EXAMPLE 20

‘. . . and the UK episode just added a sense of crisis on the sidelines,’ he says.

Suggested edit

‘. . . and the UK episode just led to a sense of crisis on the sidelines,’ he says.



EXAMPLE 21

ARTICLE 4: ‘Hard-times snacking habits boost Cadbury’s sweet spot’

By Jessica Yun

[Suggested edit](#)

ARTICLE 4: ‘Hard-times snacking habits cause a boost in Cadbury’s sweet spot’

By Jessica Yun

EXAMPLE 22

. . . in **a trend** | that **is expected to lift** sales | and **attract** local manufacturing investment from the maker of Cadbury, Oreo and Toblerone.

[Suggested edit](#)

. . . in **a trend** | that commentators **expect will lead** to a lift in sales and attraction of investment in local manufacturing by the maker of Cadbury, Oreo and Toblerone.

EXAMPLE 23

Dirk Van de Put, . . ., said | **COVID’s lockdowns had triggered** a permanent shift in **Australians’ consumption habits** | that **will** only **accelerate** with recession concerns.

[Suggested edit](#)

Dirk Van de Put, . . ., said | that **Australians’ consumption habits had shifted** permanently as a result of Covid lockdowns | and that **the shift will** only **accelerate** due to concerns about a recession.

EXAMPLE 24

And though **cost-of-living pressures and rising interest rates** are expected to precipitate a slowdown in retail spending, . . .

Suggested edit

Also, though **cost-of-living pressures and rising interest rates** are expected to cause retail spending to slow down, . . .

EXAMPLE 25

The global supply chain knots and high shipping and freight rates that resulted from the pandemic **demonstrated** just how disadvantageous it was to be over-reliant on imports, he said.

Suggested edit

The knots in the global supply chain and the high level of shipping and freight rates that resulted from the pandemic **were** evidence of the disadvantage caused by over-reliance on imports, he said.

EXAMPLE 26

The move **will divert** 120 tonnes of plastic from going into landfill.

Suggested edit

As a result of the move, **120 tonnes of plastic won't become** landfill.

EXAMPLE 27

However, the recycled soft plastic must first be shipped from Europe | as Australia lacks the facilities to recycle **'inflexible' plastic**, | **which uses** a chemical process, unlike **rigid plastic**, | **which uses** a mechanical process.

Suggested edit

However, the recycled soft plastic must first be shipped from Europe | because Australia lacks the facilities for recycling **'inflexible' plastic**, | for which **a chemical process is used**, unlike **rigid plastic**, | for which **a mechanical process is used**.



ARTICLE 5: ‘Nova radio tunes in with rebound’

By Colin Kruger

EXAMPLE 28

Nova also reported a 37 per cent rise in net profit to \$22.6 million. The strong earnings boost was achieved despite the group receiving \$10.6 million worth of JobKeeper payments **the prior year** | which **reduced** its employee expenses.

[Suggested edit](#)

Nova also reported a 37 per cent rise in net profit to \$22.6 million. The group boosted its earnings this strongly despite having received \$10.6 million in JobKeeper payments in 2020 | whereby **it reduced** its employee expenses.

EXAMPLE 29

Industry research shows | that **the radio sector has continued to improve** its performance in 2022.

[Suggested edit](#)

According to industry research, **the radio sector’s performance has continued to improve** in 2022.

EXAMPLE 30

Results from ASX-listed radio operators in August also **pointed** to continued growth.

[Suggested edit](#)

Growth had also **continued** according to ASX-listed radio operators’ results for August.

EXAMPLE 31

. . ., with the caveat | that **some of this upside could be offset** by cost inflation.

[Suggested edit](#)

. . ., with the caveat | that **some of this upside could be offset** by way of cost inflation.

Bonus suggested edits

Deb used the wrong font for this example. [active voice]

The wrong font was used [by Deb] for this example. [passive voice]



ARTICLE 6: ‘No comic relief in sight for print cartoonists’

By Michael Cavanaugh

EXAMPLE 32

Lee Enterprises newspaper *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported in September | that as part of the transition its print section would cut back to ‘a half-page of comics’ from Mondays to Saturdays.

Suggested edit

In September, in Lee Enterprises newspaper *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, a journalist reported | that the transition would include cutting back to ‘a half-page of comics’ in the newspaper’s Monday-to-Saturday print section.

EXAMPLE 33

And the *Omaha World-Herald* also reported | that ‘to operate more efficiently, we’re streamlining the comics, puzzles and features | that we and other Lee Enterprises newspapers have been providing’.

Suggested edit

Also, the editor of the *Omaha World-Herald* reported | that ‘to operate more efficiently, we’re streamlining the comics, puzzles and features | that we and the editors of other Lee Enterprises newspapers have been providing’.

EXAMPLE 34

'I think | **the decision by News Corp** seems short-sighted | and **risks alienating** a significant segment of its readership, as well as **killing off** a little piece of Australian culture.'

Suggested edit

'I think | that in making its decision, **News Corp is being** shortsighted | and **is** not only **risking alienating** many of its readers but **killing off** a little piece of Australian culture.'

EXAMPLE 35

The *Post-Dispatch's* announcement said | that '**the company's goal with these changes is to make sure** | **it can** still **devote** resources to local news coverage and strong journalism'.

Suggested edit

According to the *Post-Dispatch's* announcement, 'in making these changes, **the company intends** to make sure | it can still devote resources to local-news coverage and strong journalism'.

EXAMPLE 36

The seismic impact of such a change is shocking readers, and cartoonists | whose strips are affected.

Suggested edit

The seismic impact of the change is causing shock among readers as well as among cartoonists | whose strips are affected.

Note: In the original sentence, the verb 'shocking' is confusing and might lead to unintended humour, because 'shocking' might be interpreted as being a verb-adjective (*both* a doing word *and* a describing word) that the writer has used to modify the noun 'readers' – the 'shocking readers' would then be 'the seismic impact of such a change'. In that sentence, however, 'is shocking' is a 'transitive-verb pair' (two verbs to indicate one action). A transitive verb 'carries the action across' from the grammatical subject to the 'direct object'. In the original sentence, 'is shocking' carries the action across to 'readers'.

EXAMPLE 37

Moves such as Lee's 'make it harder for new strips to gain footing with new audiences on their merits, which is sad,' the cartoonist says. 'And it robs readers of their ability to have any meaningful participation in | what they want to see in their local papers | and furthers homogenisation.'

Suggested edit

Because of moves such as Lee's, it's 'harder for new strips to gain footing with new audiences on the basis of merit, | and that's a sad situation,' the cartoonist says. 'Also, readers are robbed of their ability to participate meaningfully in | what they want to see in their local papers, | and the comics line-up becomes more homogeneous.'

Note 1: In the original sentence, the possessive adjective 'their' and the noun 'merits' are confusing and might lead to unintended humour, because they might be interpreted as being in reference to either 'new strips' ('their new strips') or 'new audiences' ('their new audiences'). The solution is to rewrite the sentence by replacing the phrase 'on the merits' with the phrase 'on the basis of merit'.

Note 1: In the second original sentence, the writer has not only personified the 'third-person singular, neuter-gender' pronoun 'it' by enabling it to rob readers; he hasn't given it an antecedent (referent) in the first sentence.

EXAMPLE 38

Newspapers should consider this bond | before they decide to make drastic changes.

Suggested edit

Newspaper editors should consider this bond | before they decide to make drastic changes.



ARTICLE 7: 'Even pandemics have an economic upside'

By Ross Gittins

EXAMPLE 39

There's nothing new about pandemics. Over the centuries, **they've killed** millions upon millions.

[Suggested edit](#)

There's nothing new about pandemics. Over the centuries, **they've caused** millions upon millions of deaths.

EXAMPLE 40

Over the next five years, **the Black Death** spread across Europe and the Middle East, **killing** between 30 and 50 per cent of the population.

[Suggested edit](#)

Over the ensuing five years, **the Black Death** spread across Europe and the Middle East, **causing** the death of between 30 and 50 per cent of the population.

EXAMPLE 41

In England, **the Statute of Labourers**, passed in 1349, **imposed** caps on wages.

[Suggested edit](#)

In England in 1349, by way of the Statute of Labourers, **Parliament imposed** caps on wages. [active voice]

In England in 1349, by way of the Statute of Labourers, **caps on wages were imposed**. [passive voice]

EXAMPLE 42

It's widely believed | that **all these developments played** a role in the economic rise of Europe, particularly north-western Europe.

[Suggested edit](#)

Many historians believe | that **all these developments influenced** the economic rise of Europe, especially north-western Europe.

EXAMPLE 43

Fortunately, **advances in medical science mean** | our pandemic has cost the lives of a much smaller proportion of the population. And believe it or not, | **advances in economic understanding mean** | governments have known | what to do to limit the economic fallout | – even if we didn't see the inflation coming.

Suggested edit

Fortunately, due to advances in medical science, | our pandemic has caused the death of a much smaller proportion of the population. Also, believe it or not, | due to advances in economic understanding, **governments have known** | what to do to limit the economic fallout | – even if we didn't see the inflation coming.

EXAMPLE 44

One consequence of our greater understanding of | what to do | may be | that **this pandemic won't alter** the course of world economic history the way the Black Death **did**.

Suggested edit

One consequence of our greater understanding of | what to do | might be | that **this pandemic won't cause** world economic history to change the way the Black Death **did**.

Note: In the original sentence, the verb 'may' is ambiguous, because it can be in reference to either 'permission' or 'possibility'. A simple solution is to reserve 'may' for permission, as in 'You may sit down,' and reserve 'might' for possibility, as in the suggested edit.

EXAMPLE 45

And I doubt | if **the number of business flights between Sydney and Melbourne will** ever **recover**.

Suggested edit

Also, I doubt | whether **business flights between Sydney and Melbourne will** ever **be** as numerous as they were.



THE COMMA SPLICE: WHAT IS IT?

'The comma, it's a little pause.'

The comma (,) is the punctuation mark we use to indicate a pause that's about a third the length of a full stop.

We use the comma to separate elements in our writing:

Hi, everyone. [the comma used to separate a salutation from a form of address]

My favourite colours are blue, violet, pink and yellow. [The commas are used in place of the co-ordinating conjunction 'and'.]

As Mum knitted, the dog ate his dinner. [The comma is used to separate a dependent clause from an independent clause, so that 'knitted' isn't interpreted as being a transitive verb, and 'the dog' isn't its direct object – Mum didn't knit the dog.]

We were served bread and peanut butter, and coffee. [The comma is used to group items when two 'ands' are in close proximity – otherwise, 'Peanut butter with your coffee, anyone?']

Our flag is red, white and blue, and green and gold are sometimes used too. [The second comma is used to separate two independent clauses when not two but three 'ands' are in close proximity.]

. . . so, you won't attend the meeting, then? [The comma is used to separate two optional words from the independent clause (a question).]

The in-person conference, which will be on Tuesday and Wednesday, should be very enjoyable. [The comma is used to commence and conclude a non-essential clause (a relative clause, an adjectival clause), which could be removed from the sentence whereby the main intended meaning would be intact: 'The conference should be very enjoyable.']

With each *new pen*, turn the dose selector to select the *flow-check symbol*. [The comma is used to separate the introductory phrase from the mild command.]



Writers who use the **comma splice** place a comma between two discrete elements, two independent clauses or two sentences. The pause is too weak for the purpose of concluding the first self-contained element before commencing the next.

Writers sometimes or usually use the comma rather than the full stop as the default punctuation mark for concluding a sentence. Because they haven't been taught what an independent clause or a sentence is, they don't know that the comma splice is incorrect and that it might cause readers to be confused or expect the independent clause or sentence to end differently.

THE SEVEN TYPES OF SENTENCE

Simple sentences

A **simple sentence** contains at least one finite verb:

1. **Statement:** a declaration of fact

As a member, you are eligible for discounted member prices.

2. **Question:** a request for information

Would you be interested in joining the committee? [a literal question]

What were they thinking? [a rhetorical question]

You've brought your Medicare card, haven't you? [a rhetorical question that includes a question tag]

The receptionist asked the patient, 'Have you brought your Medicare card?' [a direct question]

The receptionist asked the patient whether the patient had brought her Medicare card. [an indirect question, also known as a reported question]

Note: In the last sentence, it's better not to write 'she had brought' or 'she'd brought', and 'her Medicare card' because the pronoun 'she' and the possessive adjective 'her' could be in reference to either the patient or the receptionist. The solution, although not optimal, is to repeat the correct antecedent (referent).

3. **Command:** telling your reader or listener to do or not do something

Subscribe to our job-opportunities e-mail service for notification of new jobs. [a mild command]

Keep the door to the X-ray room closed once the patient is inside! [a strong command]

4. **Exclamation:** for indicating strong feeling, emphasis, sarcasm or irony

What an interesting topic!

5. **Compound sentences**

A **compound sentence** contains at least two independent clauses:

Read back issues of *Southern Communicator* for updates on technical-communication practice, | engage through our Friends of ASTC LinkedIn group, | and connect with us on Facebook for updates. [three commands]

You screw on a new needle | and pull off *both* needle caps. [two statements that have 'you' as their grammatical subject]

Screw on a new needle; | pull off *both* needle caps. [two commands]

Screw on a new needle: | old needles can be used only once. [a command and a statement]

Screw on a new needle – | old needles can be used only once. [a command and a statement]

The most common side effects are diarrhoea and nausea; | however, these sided effects are usually mild | and normally decrease with continued use. [the connective 'however' used to connect but separate a statement from two statements]

Two common side effects are diarrhoea and nausea, however, | so perhaps inject the first few weekly doses at home. [the connective 'however' used to connect but separate a statement and a command, and the co-ordinating conjunction 'so' used to link them]

6. Complex sentences

A **complex sentence** contains at least one dependent clause:

If you have any queries or need to update your details, | please contact us at our website. [a dependent clause and a mild command]

Please contact us at our website | if you have any queries or need to update your details. [a mild command and a dependent clause]

The secondary-school English curriculum has undergone many changes | since grammar was removed from it | because educators put it in the ‘too hard’ basket, relying on students’ ability to absorb the principles by osmosis. [a statement, a dependent clause, a dependent clause and a phrase]

7. Compound–complex sentences

A **compound–complex sentence** contains at least two independent clauses and at least two dependent clauses:

The secondary-school English curriculum has undergone many changes | since grammar was removed from it | because educators put it in the ‘too hard’ basket | and decided to rely on students’ ability to absorb the principles by osmosis. [a statement, a dependent clause, a dependent clause and a statement]

Whenever I swim at the Murray Rose Pool, | I stay within the enclosure, | whereas some other swimmers venture outside it | and risk coming face to face with one of the Harbour’s apex predators, | who don’t discriminate. [a dependent clause, a statement, a dependent clause, a statement and a relative clause (an adjectival clause)]



Examples of the comma splice and how to immobilise it

EXAMPLE 1

Hi Deborah, here’s a summary of your gas bill. [a salutation followed by a statement]

Edited

Hi, Deborah. Here’s a summary of your gas bill.

EXAMPLE 2

Don't fool yourself, speed kills. [a command and a statement]

Note: In this sentence, the writer seems to be using 'speed kills' as a form of address, whereby a correct rewrite would be 'Don't fool yourself, drivers: speed kills.'

Edited

Don't fool yourself. Speed kills. [two separate sentences]

Don't fool yourself; speed kills. [a compound sentence]

Don't fool yourself: speed kills. [a compound sentence]

Don't fool yourself – speed kills. [a compound sentence]

Don't fool yourself . . . Speed kills. [two separate sentences]

Don't fool yourself (speed kills). [a compound sentence]

Don't fool yourself. (Speed kills.) [two separate sentences]

Don't fool yourself: speed kills! [a compound sentence]

Speed kills, so don't fool yourself. [a compound sentence]

Speed kills; therefore, don't fool yourself. [a compound sentence]

Speed kills, therefore don't fool yourself. [a compound sentence]

Don't fool yourself because speed kills. [a complex sentence]

Don't fool yourself, because speed kills. [a complex sentence]

Don't fool yourself: speeding motorists kill. [de-personification of the abstract noun 'speed']

Don't fool yourself: speeding causes death. [de-personification of the abstract noun 'speed']

EXAMPLE 3

Learn through training events, local presentations, workshops and webinars, notification is included in your member e-mail. [a command and a statement]

Edited

Learn through training events, local presentations, workshops and webinars. Notification is included in your member e-mail.

EXAMPLE 4

You are very welcome to step outside, have a drink or bite to eat during this time. [a statement that seems to include three commands: ‘step outside’, ‘have a drink’ and ‘bite to eat’]

Edited

You are very welcome to step outside and have a drink or a bite to eat during this time.

EXAMPLE 5

Press and hold in the dose button, repeat until a drop appears. [two mild commands]

Edited

Press and hold in the dose button. Repeat until a drop appears. [two separate sentences]

Press and hold in the dose button; repeat until a drop appears. [the two commands linked but separated in a compound sentence via the semi-colon]

Press and hold in the dose button, and repeat until a drop appears. [the two commands linked into a compound sentence via the co-ordinating conjunction ‘and’]

EXAMPLE 6

Why do writers put a comma between two sentences, it's beyond me! [a literal question and an exclamation]

Edited

Why do writers put a comma between two sentences? It's beyond me! [two separate sentences]



To conclude, I hope you've enjoyed having me draw your attention to these two 'usual suspects' we need to deprive of oxygen and eliminate summarily. The price of freedom to convey a message via the written word is eternal vigilance against letting these guys loose in our documents that are hopefully otherwise pleasant, effective, alive, clear and enduring.



The next and final page of this document is my poem 'The Poetry of Punctuation'.

The poetry of punctuation

The comma, it's a little pause.

The 'postrophe's for omittin'.

The dash – it's for a phrase – or clause.

The colon: use when fittin'.

The 'en dash' can stand for *and* or *to*,
for joining adjectives or nouns;
two examples are *Asia–Pacific*
and *the Sydney–Melbourne southbound*.

The semi-colon's half a stop;

Hyphens are 'link-
ing' devices.

This bat 'n' ball deserves the chop!

This solidus/slash suffices.

'Quotemarks', (parentheses) and [brackets] "enclose".

The ellipsis . . . for matter omitted.

Is the question mark for requesting info?

To this statement this full stop is fitted.

Yes, *Bridget Jones's Diary* is correct,
as is *Charles Dickens's writings*,
but it's *Jesus' miracles* and *Achilles' heel*,
in spite of *Elvis's sightings*.