

I have been accused of using a 'comma splice'.
What is my tutor talking about?

Identifying comma splices

Comma splices are considered bad style and certainly not to be used in academic writing if you can avoid them – and you can.

A comma splice is the use of a comma to divide what are really two independent sentences. For example

1. It was half past six, we needed to eat.
2. We can also use *shall* with the future perfect simple and continuous forms, this however, is usually a matter of formality.
3. This is an approach to concepts of a language through for example, history, geography or art, students acquire English by focusing on the topics.
4. The court ruled that the evidence was inadmissible, the accused was released.

The use of comma splices is something to avoid because it makes your writing jerky and imposes a strain on the reader who has to figure out what the independent ideas are and their connection.

In sentence 1, there are two subjects, *It* and *we*, so there are two independent clauses which should not be separated by a comma.

In sentence 2, there are also two subjects, *we* and *this*.

In sentence 3, we have *this* and *students* and in sentence 4 we have *The court* and *the accused*.

Conventionally, we can't use a comma in this way although there are exceptions with very short clauses such as, I came in, I hung up my hat, I looked around but in this case the author is probably using the punctuation for dramatic or poetic effect. Note, too, things like I came, I saw, I conquered.

Avoiding comma splices

If you see that you have used a comma splice, there are a number of ways to eradicate it. Just taking the comma away isn't one of them because it results in what's called a run-on sentence and that's even worse.

1. Simply split the sentence into two, reserving one subject for each. With Sentence 4 above, this will give you The court ruled that the evidence was inadmissible. The accused was released. The problem with this is that you lose any logical connection between the ideas and your reader has to reinstate it.
2. Use a simple additive connector (the use of a coordinating conjunction) such as *and*. In sentence 1 this gives you It was half past six and we needed to eat. The problem sometimes is that you still lose the logical connection between the ideas if you aren't careful. Try it with sentence 2.
3. To preserve the logical connection, make one clause dependent on the other (the use of a subordinating conjunction). With sentence 2, this will give you We can also use *shall* with the future perfect simple and continuous forms but this is usually a matter of formality. With sentence 4, you get The court ruled that the evidence was inadmissible, so the accused was released.
4. Replace the comma with one of three things: a dash, a colon or a semicolon. There are issues here, too, unfortunately.
 - a. If you use a dash, the reader is still forced to make the logical connection for you and in academic writing it is sometimes considered too informal

- b. A colon is conventionally used to precede a reason or an explanation so you can only use it with care. It will work for sentences 1 and 3 to give you

We needed to eat: it was half past six.

The accused was released: the court ruled that the evidence was inadmissible.

Many would consider both these sentences unacceptable and there is a good deal of rejigging to be done to make them work.

- c. A semi-colon can be used, providing the ideas are very closely related and there is no subordinating or coordinating conjunction. However, its use still makes the reader do some of the work. Consider all the 4 examples and replace the comma with a semicolon. Note that a conventional spell and grammar checker will often (but not always) identify comma splices and suggest a semi-colon. There may be a better way.

So, the rule simply is: make sure that you avoid comma splices but retain the logical connection between your ideas.