

Comma Don'ts



University Writing Center

MISTAKE #1: Comma splices—using commas to link two independent clauses without a coordinating conjunction like *for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, or *so*.

JMU is well-known for its friendly campus atmosphere, a lot of students hold doors open for each other.

How to fix it? Add a coordinating conjunction to connect the two independent clauses.

JMU is well-known for its friendly campus atmosphere, **AND** a lot of students hold doors open for each other.

MISTAKE #2: Run-on sentences—combining two independent clauses without using a comma (or another appropriate punctuation mark).

JMU has two cats that roam the quad they are very friendly.

How to fix it? Locate the two different subject-verb phrases—in this case, “JMU (subject) has (verb)” and “they (subject) are (verb).” Place a comma followed by a conjunction before the second subject-verb phrase.

JMU has two cats that roam the quad, **AND** they are very friendly.

→ The UWC’s [Online Writing Tips and Resources library](#) offers more advice on [comma splices and run-on sentences](#).

MISTAKE #3: Using commas to split up the subject of the sentence—it’s correct to use two commas to indicate nonessential, clarifying information, but information that is essential to clarify the subject of the sentence should not be set off with commas.

Students, who do not attend classes regularly, often do poorly in school.

How to fix it? In this sentence, we are not trying to imply that ALL students rarely attend classes, nor are we trying to say that ALL students flunk out. We’re talking only about the students who don’t go to class, and we’re trying to say members of this restricted group often get a rude awakening when it comes time for exams, due dates, and grades. This information is an essential part of the sentence’s subject and thus should not be set off with commas.

Students [who do not attend classes regularly](#) often do poorly in school.

MISTAKE #4: A list with less than three items—if there are less than three items in a list, there is no need to offset each item with a comma.

We need eggs, and milk.

How to fix it? Since there are only two items in the list, remove the comma.

We need eggs and milk.

MISTAKE #5: Separating the subject and verb—when we use a single comma to separate a subject from its accompanying verb.

President Alger, announced he was going to expand JMU’s parking in the following year.

How to fix it? Take out the comma so that the subject and verb are connected again.

President Alger (S) announced (V) he was going to expand JMU’s parking in the following year.

or, if you absolutely love the comma, you could add some extra nonessential information to explain the subject and then a second comma:

President Alger (S), a very wise man, announced (V) he was going to expand JMU’s parking in the following year.

→ Check out the UWC’s “Comma Dos” page in our [Online Writing Tips and Resources library](#) for more advice on how to use commas.