



Summary of Clause Punctuation

- I,ccI** comma before coordinating conjunction in compound sentence
- I;I** semicolon between independent clauses with no coordinating conjunction
- ID** no comma after independent clause in complex sentence
- D,I** comma after dependent clause in complex sentence

This easy summary of clause punctuation gives a quick reference for punctuating independent clauses and adverbial dependent clauses. Adjective (relative) clauses are different; the relative clause is enclosed in commas if it is a nonessential interruption to the main idea, but it is not enclosed in commas if its presence in the sentence is essential or necessary.

I, ccI	I; I
D, I	ID

DI? Even though we put a comma after the introductory adverbial dependent clause in a D,I complex sentence, that comma is sometimes omitted in published material if the sentence seems clear without the comma.

Comma splice error: A comma splice is the error of joining two independent clauses with a comma (I,I). *He told a joke, we laughed.* To correct this error, either insert a coordinating conjunction after the comma, or change the comma to a semicolon.

Run-on sentence error: A run-on sentence is the error of joining two independent clauses with only a coordinating conjunction or with nothing (IccI or II). This causes the two ideas in the compound sentence to blur together, losing their clear identities. *He told a joke and we laughed. He told a joke we laughed.* Remember that poets and novelists will sometimes use run-on sentences deliberately; Wallace Stevens did in his sentence, “The house was quiet and the world was calm.”





Four Purposes of Sentences

The sentence purposes are so well named that they are virtually self-defining. Each does precisely what its name implies:

declarative sentence: a sentence that declares (states): *I see it.* Sylvia Plath wrote as a mirror, saying, "I am silver and exact."

interrogative sentence: a sentence that interrogates (asks): *Do you see it?* William Blake asked of the tiger, "Did he who made the lamb make thee?"

imperative sentence: a sentence that imperiously commands: *Look for it.* Langston Hughes wrote of a mother talking to her son: "So, boy, don't you turn back."

exclamatory sentence: a sentence that exclaims: *There it is!* Percy Bysshe Shelley cried out in "To a Skylark": "Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!"

The world dictates the grammar. Grammar serves meaning, and not conversely. You cannot seek within grammar for the causes of grammatical structure; these causes are often external. A sentence will not be simple, complex, or compound because of the rules of grammar; it will have a clause structure suitable to its ideas.

There may be short, simple sentences because the moment to be communicated—say, King Richard's terrified speech in Shakespeare's *Richard III*—requires a series of frantic statements made by the hysterical king: *Give me another horse! Bind up my wounds! Have mercy, Jesu! —Soft, I did but dream. O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me! The lights burn blue. It is now dead midnight. Cold fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh. What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by: Richard loves Richard; that is, I am I.* There is nothing internal to grammar that dictates the use of these staccato, clipped sentences; rather, it is Richard's fear, his inability to utter more than a few words at a breath, that explains the syntax. In his full speech, Richard speaks thirty lines made up of thirty-two sentences containing eighteen periods, twenty-four commas, five semicolons, three colons, eight exclamation marks, and seven question marks. It is not Richard's words that communicate his agony, but rather the short, brusque manner of his speaking.