

The Well Bred sentence

Chapter 6: The Composite Sentence

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The structure

The composite sentence is a series of sentences spliced by the comma. Sentences can be spliced to become composite sentences only under three conditions:

- when independent sentences relate as items of a list;
- when a foreshortened sentence attaches to an independent sentence;
- when a sentence attributes the statement of another;

Spliced sentences that relate as items of a list

Spliced independent sentences relate as items of a list in the following composite sentence. Each of them expresses a person's attitude to *the agreement*. They are therefore properly spliced as items of a list of attitudes:

Brian claims that the agreement will effect a major increase in staff numbers, Mary agrees with him, Vic says it is valuable only because it will improve the student-teacher ratio.

The spliced 'result' sentence

The only sentence that can splice with listed sentences is the 'result' sentence (underlined) that declares the outcome of the listed facts:

Brian claims that the agreement will effect a major increase in staff numbers, Mary agrees with him, Vic says it will improve the student-teacher ratio, so there is no real disagreement at executive level.

The splicing foreshortened sentence

Sentences are foreshortened for the specific purpose of enabling their splicing to another sentence. The foreshortening strategies are the following:

Sentences foreshortened to become adjectives

The adjectival foreshortened sentence describes the subject of the independent sentence with which it splices. It is formed from the predicate adjective of a copula sentence. In the next sentences the predicate-adjective 'enraged' splices with an independent sentence and describes its subject *he*:

Enraged, he seized his assault rifle and emptied its magazine into the aircraft.

He was enraged. He seized his assault rifle and emptied its magazine into the aircraft.

Born in Spain, Miguel never did get used to our country.

Miguel was born in Spain. Miguel never did get used to our country.

Sentences foreshortened to become noun phrases

Where the subject of a copula sentence, (i) *Kara's future* is complemented by a noun phrase (*a robust one*), an independent sentence (*Kara is a publisher now*) can be foreshortened [underlined] to a noun phrase.

- (i) A publisher now, Kara's future is a robust one.

Kara is a publisher now. Her future is a robust one.

The copular sentence, rendered in bold in (ii), allows the foreshortening of an independent sentence (*John is a surgeon*) to a noun phrase (*A surgeon*):

- (ii) A surgeon, **John takes his physical fitness very seriously.**

Johns is a surgeon. John takes his physical fitness very seriously.

The foreshortened sentence that makes a noun phrase of a sentence only to dismiss it

This is the arrogant foreshortened sentence. It makes its noun-phrase structure only to knock it over it with a word like 'notwithstanding' or '[something] aside' or 'regardless of'. The next sentence makes the noun phrase *Discomfiture to those of our citizens with strong ties to that country* from the sentence 'Those of our citizens who have strong ties to that country will be discomforted', then inserts the knockout word *notwithstanding*:

Discomfiture to those of our citizens with strong ties to that country notwithstanding, this government will support belligerent action against it.

Those of our citizens with strong ties to that country will be discomforted. That does not matter. This government will support belligerent action against it.

The same operation happens in this sentence:

Objections aside, the plan has merits.

There are objections to this plan. I am disregarding those objections.

Sentences foreshortened to become participle phrases

The copula or verb of the sentence-to-be-foreshortened becomes a present or past participle, then splices with an independent sentence, as does a 'result' operator ('so', or 'therefore'):

PRESENT-PARTICIPLE PHRASES AS FORESHORTENED SENTENCES

Words being politicians' weapons, the Minister is whetting his.

Words are politicians' weapons, [therefore] the minister is whetting his.

Having weeded the flower bed, I can now relax.

I have weeded the flower bed, [so] I can now relax.

The past-participle foreshortened sentence also achieves a 'so/therefore' sense. But, unlike the present-participle foreshortened sentence, there is no scope for an explicit result operator in it:

PAST-PARTICIPLE PHRASES AS FORESHORTENED SENTENCES

The flower bed weeded, I was able to relax.

I have weeded the flower bed. I can now relax.

The deed done, repentance was still to come.

The deed was done. Repentance was still to come.

The spliced list of foreshortened sentences and the independent sentence that splices to them

Foreshortened sentences that are nouns, adjectives or participle phrases can splice with one another other before they splice with an independent sentence. A compounding operator can also compound another participle phrase to them. In this sentence, the noun phrase *A publisher now* and the present-participle phrase *having left teaching a number of years earlier* splice with each other, then compound [in italics] with the adjective phrase *second in the company only to its general manager* before this list splices with the independent sentence [in bold]:

A publisher now, having left teaching a number of years earlier, and second in the company only to its general manager, **her future is a robust one.**

The sentence foreshortened to become a relative-pronoun phrase

As a foreshortened sentence, the relative-pronoun phrase can refer to and comment upon the whole statement of the independent sentence (in italics) with which it splices, or upon a selected part of it (in bold), as in the next sentence. This foreshortened sentence (underlined) is recognised by relative pronoun 'which' that heads a relative phrase. In this sentence, the relative phrase selects *tertiary education* with *of which* and comments upon it:

Academics complain about the shortage of funds in tertiary education, the quality of which is surely deteriorating.

Academics complain about the shortage of funds in tertiary education. The quality of education in tertiary institutions is surely deteriorating.

In the next sentence the relative-pronoun phrase refers to the whole sentence *There was a nasty incident there* with 'which', and comments upon it:

There was a nasty accident there, which was only to be expected.

There was a nasty accident there. A nasty accident there was only to be expected.

This clever-kate foreshortened sentence occurs when 'which' can reference an entire independent sentence. That which-led phrase can splice also with a present-participle phrase [underlined] that acts like the conditional compounding operator *if*.

There was a nasty accident there, which was only to be expected, knowing the maniacs who ski on those slopes.

There was a nasty accident there. A nasty accident there was only to be expected, if one knows the maniacs who sky there.

'However' as a foreshortened sentence

'However' can be said to be a foreshortened sentences, and therefore splice with an independent sentence, when it carries the meaning 'it does not matter how':

However angry you are, you should apologise.

It does not matter how angry you are. You should apologise.

You must remember that your first duty is to us, however much they flatter you.

You must remember that your first duty is to us. It does not matter how much they flatter you.

The ghost sentence

In every context where ‘however’ appears alone rather than as part of a phrase, there are two sentences and an intervening implicit third sentence [underlined]. The function of that third sentence is to disjoin the two it intervenes. That disjoining is achieved by ‘however’, which represents the ghost sentence ‘something else is also true’ or ‘this is the other perspective’:

You paid some money. However, it was not the full amount owing.

You paid some money. Something else is also true. It was not the full amount owing.

Other attempts at replication, however, yielded far fewer spectacular results.

Other attempts at replication [This is the other perspective] yielded far fewer spectacular results.

however, but, nevertheless and still as synonyms

The words ‘however’, ‘nevertheless’, ‘but’ and ‘still’ are not ordinary disjunctive operators when they are synonymous. The fact that they are always demarcated by the comma from an independent sentence acknowledges this. When they are synonymous they represent sentences that are implicitly present between two sentences:

You will be shot. However/Nevertheless/Still, you may choose the rifle.

You will be shot. There is a mitigating circumstance: You may choose the rifle.

It is unusual to see a comma after ‘but’. Yet the comma is a perfectly correct there when ‘but’ is synonymous with ‘however’, ‘nevertheless’ and ‘still’:

You will be shot. But, you may choose the rifle.

You will be shot. There is a mitigating circumstance:
You may choose the rifle.

The sentence foreshortened as an 'as'-led sequence

Two sentences can splice if they make parallel statements and one of them is foreshortened to become an ‘as’-led sequence. The parallel ‘being a vegetarian’ obtains in these two sentences:

She is a vegetarian. Her friends are vegetarians.

One or the other of them can foreshorten to become an ‘as’-led sequence:

She is a vegetarian, as are her friends.

Her friends are vegetarians, as is she.

In the next two sentences the parallel is ‘the telling’. The sentence that refers to the past event is foreshortened:

As I have already told you, you may not eat in class.

I have already told you that you may not eat in class.

The ‘as’-led sequence is sometimes a foreshortened ‘ghost’ sentence. In this set of sentences it foreshortens a ghost sentence something like ‘Mary has come to mind’:

John is an able pianist. As for Mary, she wins every competition she enters.

The spliced attributing sentence

Attributing sentences are ones that assign a comment or a speech sequence. **They can splice only with one independent sentence**, either with one that follows a sentence or intervenes it:

‘You must know’, she said, ‘that it is late’.

‘You must know that it is late’, she said.

In the next sentence, *he warned them* can splice only with the sentence that reports the content of the warning *he* gave. It cannot splice also with the sentence that follows:

‘It is late’, he warned them. They really ought to go home.

Validity in the composite sentence

Validity in the composite sentence is easily obtained. One need only remember that the composite sentence can splice only when one of six specific conditions is satisfied:

1. Do the listing commas list only sentences that are items of a list?

Some writers think, mistakenly, that a comma can splice any two sentences that address the same topic. Indeed, the original version of a sentence discussed above made that mistake:

In their recent policy statement the leadership was quick to praise the agreement, **Brian** claims that the agreement will effect a major increase in staff numbers, Mary agrees with him, and Vic says that

the agreement is valuable only because it improves student-teacher ratios.
[DEFECTIVE SENTENCE]

The leading sentence *In their recent policy statement the leadership was quick to praise the agreement* is a summary of attitudes to ‘the agreement’. Being a summary, it cannot lead spliced sentences that list individual attitudes. It should have been marked with a full stop or a colon:

In their recent policy statements the leadership was quick to praise the agreement. Brian claims ...

Parenthetical commas amid the listing commas

Sometimes writers interrupt listed sentences with explanatory parenthetical sequences demarcated by commas. The author of the following sentence did this. (His parenthetical sequences are highlighted in blue.) He spliced three sentences (the splicing commas are highlighted), lopping the subject of the second and third, to list the events in *John’s* professional life. (The verbals of the spliced sentences are rendered in bold italics.)

John ***began to edit*** a literary periodical, ***became*** the conductor of a small theatre orchestra, ***accepted*** an appointment as art master in a girls’ school, all in a space of a few months and in order to be able to marry, until his future father-in-law, broad-minded though he was in the matters of genius and career, would no longer put up with it, he read him the Riot Act firmly.
[wrongly spliced sentence]

Writers given to making parenthetical comments in the context of a composite sentence need to be alert, for this is the practice most likely to result in a composite sentence that continues beyond the point where it should have been stopped. Indeed, in this sentence, the writer has improperly spliced *he read him the riot act firmly* to its end. The subject *he* of that wrongly spliced sentence represents *John’s father-in-law*, not *John*. That alone was enough to disable the splicing, since the spliced list of activities are *John’s* activities. Apart from that, the spliced sentence headed by *until* is the ‘result’ sentence that completes the sentence. No sentence can splice with the ‘result’ sentence of a composite sentence.

It is a pity that this otherwise impressively controlled, elegant complex sentence is marred by the writer’s failure to stop it after *put up with it.*:

John began to edit a literary periodical, became the conductor of a small theatre orchestra, accepted an appointment as art

master in a girls' school, all in a space of a few months and in order to be able to marry, until his future father-in-law, broad minded though he was in the matters of genius and career, would no longer put up with it. He read him the Riot Act.

2. Is it sentences or phrases that are being listed?

In the next sentence the comma that splices the foreshortened sentence *Born in 1799 to an ancient and impoverished family* to the independent sentence is the only splicing comma.

Born in 1799 to an ancient and impoverished family,
Pushkin lived his entire life attending St Petersburg salons, walking at designated times in the park, forever scrutinised by the Tsar's secret police.

The subsequent commas are not commas that splice sentences. They are commas that demarcate a list of adverb phrases that describe the manner of the act *lived* of the subject *Pushkin*:

... attending St Petersburg salons, walking at designated times in the park, forever scrutinised by the Tsar's secret police.

A common blunder among writers is to mistake comma-demarcated phrases (highlighted in blue) for sentences, then splice an independent sentence (underlined) to them:

Born in 1799 to an ancient and impoverished family, Pushkin lived his entire life attending St Petersburg salons, walking at designated times in the park, forever scrutinised by the Tsar's secret police, he never went abroad.
[wrongly used splicing comma]

An independent sentence cannot be spliced with a list of spliced phrases. *He never went abroad* is a sentence. Obviously, *he never went abroad* is, like the adverb phrases that precede it, a description of how Pushkin *lived* his life.) If the sentence *He never went abroad* is re-cast as an adverb phrase (underlined), it can be listed with the preceding adverb phrases:

Born in 1799 to an ancient and impoverished family,
Pushkin lived his entire life attending St Petersburg salons, walking at designated times in the park, forever scrutinised by the Tsar's secret police,
never going abroad.

Otherwise, the sentence must stop when the listed adverb phrases do, and *He never went abroad* must be an independent sentence:

Born in 1799 to an ancient and impoverished family, **Pushkin lived his entire life** attending St Petersburg salons, walking at designated times in the park, forever scrutinised by the Tsar's secret police. He never going abroad.

3. Do the sentence and the foreshortened sentence really splice?

It is essential to realise that a foreshortened sentence does not splice with an independent sentence just because it has been foreshortened. A properly spliced foreshortened sentence (underlined) is this one:

Its credibility forever ruined in the eyes of the people who matter, **the bank is finished.**

In this copula sentence, the subject *bank* is described by the predicate adjective *finished*. In the foreshortened sentence, *Its* represents *the bank*. Its predicate-adjective phrase *forever ruined in the eyes of the people who matter* can therefore describe *the bank*:

If the subject of the foreshortened sentence is other than the subject of the independent sentence, that foreshortened sentence cannot contain an adjective phrase that describes the subject of the independent sentence: It describes its own subject. And describing its own subject, it cannot splice with the independent sentence:

Thousands of **public servants have been retrenched** since last June, those remaining glad to be in work.

wrong use of the splicing comma

This foreshortened sentence cannot attach to the verb *have been retrenched*. This is so because the subject of the foreshortened sentence *those remaining glad to be in work* is *those remaining*. And *those remaining* cannot represent the subject *Thousands of public servants* of the independent sentence (in bold). So this foreshortened sentence cannot splice. It has to be an independent sentence:

Thousands of **public servants have been retrenched** since last June. **Those who remain are glad** to be in work.

4. Is the adjectival foreshortened sentence well placed?

The placement of the foreshortened sentence that acts like an adjective is a serious issue in the process of making sense. The next sentence misplaces the foreshortened sentence and therefore fails in its intention to describe the subject of the independent sentence:

The minister opened a conference on affirmative action in tertiary institutions *attended by the senior administrators of every university in the country*.

[defective sentence]

The foreshortened sentence: *attended by the senior administrators of every university in the country* must precede the independent sentence. Otherwise it acts as it does in the foregoing sentence: as an adjective phrase that describes *tertiary institutions* as places *attended by the senior administrators of every university in the country*. It should have described *the minister*:

Attended by the senior administrators of every university in the country, the Minister opened a conference on affirmative action in tertiary institutions.

5. Does the attributing sentence splice with only one sentence?

This is probably the simplest of the composite-sentence splicings, so it is surprising that so many writers misuse it. The most common mistake is that of trying to splice an attributing sentence with two sentences:

‘It’s late’, she said, ‘we must call a taxi.’

[wrongly used splicing comma]

The two sentences, without the attributing *she said*, are *It’s late* and *We must call a taxi*. The attributing sentence can splice only with the first one. The other must remain an independent sentence:

‘It’s late’, she said. ‘We must call a taxi.’

It is only when the attributing sentence intervenes one sentence of a speaker that a set of two commas demarcates it. The intervened sentence in the next sentence is *I seem to remember that you used to enjoy walking*:

‘I seem to remember’, *he smiled mischievously as he prodded her into motion*, ‘that you used to enjoy walking’.

6. Does ‘however’ disjoin two independent sentences?

A surprisingly prevalent misuse of ‘however’ tries to make it a disjunctive operator within one sentence. The writer of the next sentence did this. But ‘however’ simply cannot be a one-sentence disjunctive operator. It is a foreshortened sentence that attaches to one independent sentence to make a disjunctive statement about a foregoing one.

There are various government programmes we can tap into to obtain funds, however, we are looking

also at making sponsorship proposals to private businesses.

[defective sentence]

This sentence should have been stopped before *however*:

There are various government programmes we can tap into to obtain funds. However, we are looking also at making sponsorship proposals to private businesses.

* * *