Common Sentence Structure Problems

A ***run-on sentence*** smushes together two or more independent clauses—that is, grammatically complete ideas—either without any punctuation at all (fused sentences) or with incorrect punctuation (a comma splice). The best way to catch run-on sentences is to read your writing aloud, and to ensure that the pauses in your voice are reflected in correct punctuation. Independent clauses should be joined together either with a conjunction (if the conjunction is *and*, it should be preceded by a comma) or with a semicolon, which is a stronger form of punctuation than a comma.

Incorrect: Learning a new language is similar to learning to swim it takes a lot of practice.
Correct: Learning a new language is similar to learning to swim since it takes a lot of practice
Correct: Learning a new language is similar to learning to swim, and takes a lot of practice.
Correct: Learning a new language is similar to learning to swim; it takes a lot of practice.

Incorrect: The experiment failed, it had been left unobserved for too long.
Practice:

Incorrect: A newly arrived international student faces many problems for example, he has to cope
               with a new culture.
Practice:

A ***choppy sentence*** is a sentence that is too short. Short sentences can be effective if used sparingly, but strings of them make for a distractingly harsh rhythm. Mix it up! If your prose sounds like a telegram when read aloud, then you have a passage of choppy sentences.

Incorrect: Wind is an enduring source of power. Water is also an unlimited energy source. Dams
               produce hydraulic power. They have existed for a long time. Windmills are relatively new.
Correct: Both wind and water are enduring sources of power. Dams have produced hydraulic power
               for a long time, but windmills are relatively new.

Incorrect: Our results were inconsistent. The program obviously contains an error. A revision of the
               program is required.
Practice:

A ***rambling sentence*** contains an egregious amount of subordinate clauses nested within clauses, or it piles phrases and clauses on top of each other in no particular order. Reading aloud also can help you to spot rambling sentences; if your sentence contains more than three or four conjunctions, or if you run out of breath before finishing it, then you have spotted a rambler.

Incorrect: In the event that we get the contract, we must be ready by June 1 with the necessary personnel and equipment to get the job done, so with this end in mind a staff meeting, which all group managers are expected to attend, is scheduled for February 12.

Correct: An all-staff meeting including all group managers is scheduled for February 12. During this meeting we should discuss the issue of personnel and equipment preparation and schedule a plan for completing the contract by June 1st, if the contract is received.

Incorrect: Although the blue whale has been protected for over 30 years and its numbers are increasing, especially in the North Pacific, where whale hunting has been banned, it is still at risk of extinction as its habitat is being polluted by waste from oil tankers and its main food, the plankton, is being killed off by harmful rays from the sun, which can penetrate the earth's atmosphere because there is a huge hole in the ozone layer over Antarctica.

Practice:

Non-parallel structure results when similar parts of a sentence do not match each other in form. Writing with parallel structure makes your ideas more legible to a reader, and smoothens your sentences' flow. While building lists and complex sentences, be particularly vigilant about articles, prepositions, and correlative expressions (*both . . . and*; *not only . . . but also*).

Incorrect: . . . for better, worse, rich or poor, in sickness and healthy times, to love . . .
Correct: . . . for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish . . .

Incorrect: It was both an ugly suit and one that seemed to have no shape.
Correct: The suit was both ugly and shapeless.

Incorrect: You not only neglected to call me, but also you didn't answer my texts.
Correct: You neglected not only to call me, but also to answer my texts.

Incorrect: The teacher wanted to know which country we came from and our future goals.
Practice:

Incorrect: The book seeks not only to advance a new theory, but also aims at readability.
Practice:

Finally, a note about **_misplaced modifiers._** If you banish phrases that introduce important details to distant parts of a sentence, you can introduce ambiguity into your prose—sometimes with hilarious results. The best solution is simply to keep related words together, unless some strong reason exists for separating them. Here are some examples; think about how you might fix them.

Headline: Long-Lost Twins Reunited after 18 Years in Disney World

What now? Being too sexy, the Episcopal priest and his family walked out of the movie.

Groucho Marx: The other day, I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas, I'll   never know.