

# False Starts

## When to Include Them and When to Omit Them

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## What's a False Start?

So today I wanted to-- today, I thought I'd-- I want to cover false starts.

False starts can be troublesome for many and there is a common misconception here because of the name – false **starts**. A *false start* is the term we use to describe any time a speaker corrects themselves or changes of direction of their thought. It can happen anywhere, not just at the beginning of the line or sentence. They can occur in the middle of a sentence and only contain a word or two, or it could be almost a full sentence before the speaker abruptly changes direction.

To determine if a false start can be safely omitted, we do not necessarily count from the beginning of the sentence. It's about **how many words you would have to remove to have the sentence correct**. Our general rule is that we keep four words or more and remove three or less (with some exceptions as outlined below and in the Style Guide). Remember that only the words to the *left* of the dashes are counted as the false start.

Here are some examples and how to handle them. False starts are shown in red within curly brackets. Remember that the words *within* the curly brackets are what's included in the word count.

## Example 1: Two Words

**Said:** I like to go to the beach {*whenever it's*}-- only when it's not too hot.

**Type:** I like to go to the beach only when it's not too hot.

**Explanation:**

*Whenever it's* is a two-word false start; it can be removed, and the sentence still makes sense.

## Example 2: One Word

**Said:** I like to go to the beach only when it's not too {*cold*}-- hot.

**Type:** I like to go to the beach only when it's not too hot.

**Explanation:**

*Cold* is a one-word false start; it can be removed, and the sentence still makes sense.

## Example 3: Four Words

**Said:** I like to *go to the beach*-- go to the park.

**Type:** I like to go to the beach-- go to the park.

**Explanation:**

*Go to the beach* is a four-word false start, so it needs to stay. Note that the words *go to the* were repeated in the corrected sentence, yet we still include them in our "word count" for determining whether to keep the false start, because we can't have a sentence that says, "I like to *go to the* go to the park." Remember the false start is the words that must be removed for the sentence to make sense.

## Wait - Repetition or False Start?

Keep in mind that sometimes a repetition is intentional and not necessarily the speaker correcting themselves. They can say something and then repeat it while adding more information for clarity. For example:

- I like cake. I like cake a lot!
- I was not aware. I was not aware that it was an issue.
- I hate when she does that. I hate when she calls us all into the meetings.

You will have to judge the difference based on the speaker's tone of voice and pace of speech, as well as the context of what is being said. If it sounds like it could be a complete sentence on its own, then it probably is intentional.

Here are some examples that could go either way:

- I don't know that-- I don't know that I can think of one right now.
- Do you think maybe-- do you think maybe you can come up with one?

## Multiple False Starts

When there is more than one false start, we count the words of each false start separately.

### Example 4: Two Short False Starts

**Said:** I like to go {to the}-- {to the park}-- to the beach.

**Type:** I like to go to the beach.

**Explanation:**

*To the* is a two-word false start. This should be omitted. *To the park* is a three-word false start. This should also be omitted. So although it is five words total, we count each false start separately.

## Corrected False Starts

In the event a speaker corrects their own false start before continuing - i.e., there are other words added - **we do not remove them or the false start that preceded them**, because then we lose essential meaning and the result would be a sentence that doesn't make sense. As such, you should include the short false start to accurately capture the meaning of what was said. Examples of words that speakers commonly use to correct themselves are *or*, *I mean*, *I'm sorry*, *excuse me*, etc.

### Example 5: Short Corrected False Starts

- I like to go **to the bank-- sorry**, to the beach.
- She hung the **pictures-- excuse me**, the paintings over the mantel.

**Explanation:**

*To the bank* is a three-word false start; however, the speaker corrects themselves by saying **sorry**. So we keep it all. The same applies to the second example.

## False Starts in Quotations

False starts within quotations are treated the same as all other false starts.

### Example 6: Four Words Within a Quote

**Said:** He told me, "John, we need **four dozen cupcakes for--** four dozen cupcakes for the party."

**Type:** He told me, "John, we need four dozen cupcakes for-- four dozen cupcakes for the party."

**Explanation:**

*Four dozen cupcakes for* is a four-word false start (including the repeated words), so it needs to stay. *(Notice that the false start contains the exact same words that the speaker repeated, but since it's four words, we still keep it.)*

## Example 7: Three Words Within a Quote

**Said:** He told me, "We need {four dozen cupcakes}-- about four dozen cupcakes for the party."

**Type:** He told me, "We need about four dozen cupcakes for the party."

**Explanation:**

*Four dozen cupcakes* is a three-word false start; it needs to be removed.

## False Starts Interrupted With An Interjection

### Example 8: One Word Interrupted

**Said:** She said, "I'm so hungry that I could eat {the}" - she was talking about the cake - "the whole thing."

**Type:** She said, "I'm so hungry that I could eat" - she was talking about the cake - "the whole thing."

**Explanation:**

*The* is a one-word false start that needs to be removed.

## False Start FAQs

### Q: Do we count crutch words?

**A:** When counting words of a false start, we would **not** count filler or crutch words like *like*, *you know*, or *um*. Remove the words that are always removed first, then see how many words you have left in your false start.

### Q: Can we remove words from the right side of the double dash?

**A:** We always remove words **from the left of the double dashes**, never from the right. Think of it like this: if you remove words from the right, you're getting rid of part of the *correction*. We don't remove corrections, only the *false* starts.

We do think that-- we do hope that this will help you with most false start scenarios; however, should you have any questions, need further clarification, or if we can assist you further, please feel free to ask!