

Problems with Sentence Structure

There are three basic kinds of sentences: simple, compound, and complex. We already encountered these sentence types in Parts One and Two. Here, we learn about the parts of the sentences and how they work together. Along the way, you will have the opportunity to broaden your understanding with a little practice.

Simple Sentences

In previous lessons, you learned that a sentence must have a **subject** and a **verb**, often called a **predicate**. In the following sentences, the subject has one line under it; the verb (predicate) has two.

Maria yelled.

A section of the bridge fell during the recent storm.

These are *simple sentences*. Each one contains a subject and a verb. Either the subject or the verb, or both, may be *compound*. Something that is compound has two or more parts.

The following sentences have compound parts:

COMPOUND SUBJECT: Cindy and Jeffrey smiled.

COMPOUND VERB: Cindy smiled and laughed.

COMPOUND SUBJECT AND VERB: Cindy and Jeffrey smiled and laughed.

Compound Sentences

As we learned earlier, two or more *simple sentences* can be combined to form a *compound sentence*.

SIMPLE SENTENCE: Dogs show affection for their owners.

SIMPLE SENTENCE: Cats are more aloof.

COMPOUND SENTENCE: Dogs show affection for their owners, but cats are more aloof.

The parts of a compound sentence are often joined together by **and**, **but**, **or**, or **nor**.

These “joining words” are called *coordinating conjunctions*.

When two sentences are joined to make a compound sentence, the two main parts are called *clauses*. Because these two parts can stand by themselves as complete sentences, they are called *independent clauses*.

COMPOUND SENTENCE: The bell rang, AND students quickly filled the halls.

COMPOUND SENTENCE: Are you coming to the game, OR have you made other plans?

COMPOUND SENTENCE: Rob doesn't like lima beans, NOR does he care for spinach. (To identify subject and verb, mentally arrange the sentence in subject- verb order: “he does care for spinach.”)

Complex Sentences

We worked with *complex sentences* and saw how they can add interest and variety to writing. Now we look more closely at what makes a complex sentence.

Like a compound sentence, a complex sentence has two or more clauses, but at least one of the clauses cannot stand by itself as a sentence. Note the following example:

COMPLEX SENTENCE: If Paula calls, give her my message.

FIRST CLAUSE: If Paula calls, (*subordinate clause*)

SECOND CLAUSE: give her my message. (*independent clause*)

The *first clause* cannot function alone as a sentence. Although it has both a subject and a verb, it needs something to complete its thought. It is a **subordinate clause**. The *second clause* can stand by itself. It is an **independent clause** with the understood subject *you*.

Subordinate Clauses

Subordinate clauses can be difficult. Sometimes we make the mistake of punctuating them as if they were complete sentences. Then we end up with a *sentence fragment*, which will be covered in the next section.

Subordinate clauses begin with connectives, or “joining words,” called **subordinating conjunctions**. Here’s a partial list:

After	Than	Although	Though	As	Till	Because	Unless
Before	Until	How	When	If	While	Since	Why

In the following sentences, the conjunctions are capitalized, the subordinate clauses are circled, and the independent clauses are underlined.

COMPLEX SENTENCE: Juan went home **WHEN** the game ended.

COMPLEX SENTENCE: **BEFORE** the movie started, Kris bought popcorn.

More on Subordinate Clauses

Another type of subordinate clause begins with the pronoun **who**, **which**, or **that**. In the following sentences, the subordinate clauses are circled. You can see that they cannot stand by themselves as sentences.

COMPLEX SENTENCE: Ellen is the girl **WHO** won the golf tournament.

COMPLEX SENTENCE: The creamy filling, **WHICH** is the best part of the cookie, was eaten first.

COMPLEX SENTENCE: The part of the movie **THAT** I liked best was the ending.

Sentence Fragments

One of the key skills you will need is the ability to write complete sentences. The sentence fragment is a pitfall to avoid.

Question: What is a sentence fragment?

Answer: When a group of words does not express a complete thought, it is a **sentence fragment**.

Here are some examples of them. Although they begin with a capital letter and have end punctuation, they are not complete sentences. Study ways they can be made into complete sentences.

NO VERB: Raquel, along with a friend of hers from Dallas.

COMPLETE SENTENCE: Raquel arrived, along with a friend of hers from Dallas.

NO VERB: A small puppy running across the lawn. (The word *running* by itself is not a verb. It needs a helping verb like *is* or *was*.)

COMPLETE SENTENCE: A small puppy was running across the lawn.

NO SUBJECT: Took the train from Boston to New Haven.

COMPLETE SENTENCE: He took the train from Boston to New Haven.

NO VERB, NO SUBJECT: From my uncle in Dallas.

COMPLETE SENTENCE: I got a gift from my uncle in Dallas.

A common error is the use of a prepositional phrase as a complete sentence. A **preposition** relates the noun or pronoun following it to some other part of the sentence. A **phrase** is a group of connected words that does not contain a subject or a predicate.

PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE: Near the monitor on the desk.

COMPLETE SENTENCE: An owner's manual lay near the monitor on the desk.

Subordinate Clauses as Fragments

Subordinate clauses, even though they have a subject and a verb, are not complete sentences.

SUBORDINATE CLAUSE: Unless you are here by six o'clock.

COMPLETE SENTENCE: Unless you are here by six o'clock, I will have to leave.

SUBORDINATE CLAUSE: When suddenly the traffic on Main Street came to a halt.

COMPLETE SENTENCE: My family was driving home when suddenly the traffic on Main Street came to a halt.

SUBORDINATE CLAUSE: Which have contributed to serious air pollution problems.

COMPLETE SENTENCE: Many states have strict inspection and maintenance programs to control car exhaust emissions, which have contributed to serious air pollution problems.

A sentence fragment that consists of a subordinate clause can be corrected in two ways. One way is by eliminating the subordinating conjunction. The other way is by adding words to complete the thought.

SUBORDINATE CLAUSE: When Julia won.

COMPLETE SENTENCE: Julia won. (The subordinating conjunction *when* is eliminated.)

COMPLETE SENTENCE: I was happy when Julia won. (Words are added to complete the thought.)

Verbals as Fragments

Most of us play more than one role in life. You may be both a student and an athlete.

Your father may be a gardener and a police officer. Your sister may be a singer and an actress.

All three of you have different functions in each role. Playing two or more roles is a familiar part of life.

Some kinds of words also play two roles. A **verbal** is such a word. The suffix *al* means "like"; a verbal is *like a verb* but is not a verb. As the name suggests, it has a verb role, but it also acts as another part of speech. There are three different kinds of verbals: participles, gerunds, and infinitives. We now take a close look at each of these.

Participles

A participle acts as both a verb and an adjective.

We found Darcy *painting* a mural.

(*Painting* modifies *Darcy*, like an adjective, and takes an object, *mural*, like a verb.)

Exhausted by the heat, we all jumped into the pool.

Exhausted modifies *we*, like an adjective, and in turn is modified by a prepositional phrase, *by the heat*, like a verb.)

Having pitched a perfect game, Brian spoke to the reporters.

(*Having pitched* modifies *Brian*, like an adjective, and takes an object, *game*, like a verb.)

A participle cannot make a complete sentence without a true verb.

NOT A SENTENCE: Denyce jumping up and down with her diploma.

SENTENCE: Denyce was jumping up and down with her diploma. (The helping verb *was* completes the verb.)

SENTENCE: Denyce jumped up and down with her diploma.

NOT A SENTENCE: Jaleel packing his gear for the rafting adventure.

SENTENCE: Jaleel packed his gear for the rafting adventure.

SENTENCE: Packing his gear for the rafting adventure, Jaleel threw in a change of clothes.

Gerunds

A gerund acts as both a verb and a noun.

I enjoy *riding* my bike early in the morning.

(*Riding* is the object of *enjoy*, like a noun. It takes an object, *bike*, like a verb.)

Driving a car in the city requires concentration and good nerves.

(*Driving* is the subject of *requires*, like a noun. It takes an object, *car*, like a verb.)

A gerund cannot make a complete sentence without a true verb.

NOT A SENTENCE: Winning the soccer match with a penalty kick.

SENTENCE: Winning the soccer match with a penalty kick delighted the fans from Argentina.

SENTENCE: Argentina won the soccer match with a penalty kick.

Infinitives

An infinitive can act as a noun, an adjective, or an adverb. An infinitive usually appears with *to*.

Jeremy tried *to add* the solution to the glass beaker.

(*To add* is the object of *tried*, like a noun. It takes an object, *solution*, like a verb.)

The first student *to solve* the problem gets extra credit.

(*To solve* modifies *student*, like an adjective. It has a direct object, *problem*, like a verb.)

We used dry kindling *to start* the campfire.

(*To start* modifies *used*, like an adverb. It takes an object, *campfire*, like a verb.)

An infinitive cannot make a complete sentence without a true verb.

NOT A SENTENCE: To pick blackberries for a pie.

SENTENCE: Cara decided to pick blackberries for a pie.

SENTENCE: Cara picked blackberries for a pie.

Run-on Sentences

Writing sentence fragments is a serious error. Writing run-on sentences is an equally serious error.

Question: What is a run-on sentence?

Answer: A **run-on sentence** is two or more sentences written as if they were one sentence.

Sometimes sentences run on with no punctuation separating them, as in the first example following. Sometimes, as in the second example, a comma is present, but a comma is not strong enough to separate two complete sentences.

RUN-ON SENTENCE: I enjoy computer games they keep me entertained on rainy days.

SEPARATE SENTENCES (CORRECT) : I enjoy computer games. They keep me entertained on rainy days.

RUN-ON SENTENCE: There was a loud splash, the dog had jumped into the pool.

SEPARATE SENTENCES (CORRECT) : There was a loud splash. The dog had jumped into the pool.

Change Run-on Sentences to Compound and Complex Sentences

Some run-on sentences can be corrected by adding an appropriate connecting word.

RUN-ON SENTENCE: Video games require good coordination, players must react quickly.

COMPOUND SENTENCE (CORRECT) : Video games require good coordination, and players must react quickly.

RUN-ON SENTENCE: Britney goes to summer school, she has to improve her math grade.

COMPLEX SENTENCE (CORRECT) : Britney goes to summer school because she has to improve her math grade.

The following words can lead to run-on sentences: *also, hence, nevertheless, nonetheless, furthermore, then, therefore, and thus*. These words are not conjunctions (they are adverbs).

They cannot join sentences with only a comma. Sometimes a semicolon is used.

RUN-ON SENTENCE: The driver stopped, then he got out of his car.

SEPARATE SENTENCES (CORRECT): The driver stopped. Then he got out of his car.

RUN-ON SENTENCE: My best subject is science, therefore I took a science elective this year.

WITH SEMICOLON (CORRECT) : My best subject is science; therefore, I took a science elective this year.