

# SENTENCE FRAGMENTS

A sentence fragment is a piece of information that is punctuated as a sentence but that lacks some of the characteristics of a complete sentence.

## 1. Complete sentences

A sentence must contain both a **subject** and a **verb**. The subject identifies who or what is performing an action and the verb identifies the action being performed. A complete sentence may contain additional information or details in the main part of the sentence (the **independent clause**, which can stand “independently,” or by itself) or in a supplemental part (the **dependent clause**, which “depends” on another part of the sentence for its meaning and cannot stand alone). Sentences can vary in length from a few words to many lines of text, so length is not a reliable indicator of a complete sentence.

*Examples*

**I am.** *This sentence contains a subject (I) and a verb (am).*

**Music and art inspire and educate.** *This sentence contains a compound subject (music and art) and two verbs (inspire and educate).*

**The large house, which was believed to be haunted, had been abandoned for many years.** *This sentence contains a subject (the large house) and a verb (had been). It also contains a dependent clause (which was believed to be haunted) that describes the subject but which cannot stand by itself.*

\*\*\* Note: imperative statements are complete sentences with implied subjects. For example, in the sentence “Do your homework.” the subject “you” is implied.

## 2. Sentence fragments

Sentence fragments occur when phrases are punctuated as sentences even though they are not actually sentences. Often we write them when we feel we have finished expressing a thought, and then decide to add to it - but add to it wrongly. There are three types of errors which produce sentence fragments:

1) No subject

*Example* I am tired of having to remind her to do things. **Tired of having to ask her to help.**

*The statement in bold does not have a subject; we do not know **who** is tired of having to ask her to help.*

## 2) No verb

*Example* On that warm summer evening there were parents out walking with their children. **People playing baseball at the park.**

*Here, the statement in bold does not contain a verb. Looked at by itself, we do not know what is being **said** about the people playing baseball at the park.*

\*\*\* Note: Verbals, such as infinitives (the “to” form, i.e. “to play”) and past participles and present participles (words ending in “ing” or “ed,” like “playing,” above), **appear** to be verbs but do not function as verbs within a sentence.

## 3) A dependent clause without an independent clause

*Example* I was late for class and missed the exam. **Because the bus was slow.**

*The bold phrase is a dependent clause; it provides additional information about the independent clause. If we look at this statement by itself, there is no independent clause so we do not know the significance of the slow bus.*

\*\*\* Note: A dependent clause, while it may contain a subject and a verb, can be identified by a **cue word**, usually a subordinating conjunction or a relative pronoun. The following table provides examples of cue words.

### Common Subordinating Words

when	if	as if	in order that
before	because	as soon as	provided that
after	although	as long as	since
as	unless	even if	so that
while	whereas	even though	though

## 3. Identifying sentence fragments

Sentence fragments can be identified by using one of the following tests:

- 1) Turn the statement into a true or false question by adding “wasn’t it?” or “didn’t it?” at the end. Then ask yourself, “can I answer this question?”
- 2) Ask yourself whether the statement would convey a complete thought by itself, without the sentences surrounding it.

*Examples*

**The cold weather.**

Test #1) The cold weather, didn't it? *We cannot answer. What did the cold weather do?*

Test #2) Does this statement convey complete information? *No, we still don't know anything about the cold weather. This sentence is lacking a verb.*

**The cold weather delayed the game.**

Test #1) The cold weather delayed the game, didn't it? *Yes, it did.*

Test #2) Does this statement convey complete information? *Yes, we know that the cold weather did something after reading the sentence; therefore, it is a complete sentence.*

**Because the cold weather delayed the game.**

Test #1) Because the cold weather delayed the game, didn't it? *We cannot answer. What happened because of the game delay?*

Test #2) Does this statement convey complete information? *No. Since the phrase begins with "because," we expect some further piece of information to be related to the weather and the delayed game. This statement is a dependent clause. It depends for its meaning on information we haven't seen. And note, it begins with one the "cue words" listed on this page.*

**We were late for dinner because the cold weather delayed the game.**

Test #1) We were late because the cold weather delayed the game, weren't we? *Yes, we were.*

Test #2) Does this statement convey complete information by itself? *Yes, we can identify the consequences of the delayed game; it caused us to be late for dinner.*

#### **4. Exceptions to the rules**

Sentence fragments are acceptable in some types of writing, for stylistic or emphatic purposes. They are used in creative writing, poetry, advertising and journalism.

*Examples*

**"Accept everything about yourself - I mean everything. You are you and that is the beginning and the end. No apologies. No regrets."** Clark Moustakas

**"When you care enough to send the very best."** Hallmark slogan

**"Because I'm worth it."** L'Oréal cosmetics slogan

## 5. Correcting sentence fragments

Sentence fragment errors can be corrected in the following ways:

- 1) If there is not a subject, add one.
- 2) If there is not a verb, add one.
- 3) If there is a dependent clause without an independent clause, either
  - a) add an independent clause, or
  - b) join the dependent clause to an existing independent clause,or
  - c) remove the subordinating word or words, or
  - d) revise the dependent clause to form an independent clause.

**6. Sentence fragments exercise** - Find and correct the errors in these paragraphs.

### *Example 1*

The study of French requires patience. Because the grammar rules are different from those of the English language. This should not discourage you from learning a new language. It important to be able to communicate with people from other countries. In fact, in Canada it is doubly important to learn French. So you will be better able to communicate with your fellow citizens. Which include getting a job and being able to travel. For these reasons encourage you to accept the challenge and learn French.

### *A corrected version*

The study of French requires patience *because*<sup>1</sup> the grammar rules are different from those of the English language. This should not discourage you from learning a new language. It *is*<sup>2</sup> important to be able to communicate with people from other countries. In fact, in Canada it is doubly important to learn French. *You*<sup>3</sup> will be able to better communicate with your fellow citizens. *There are many other benefits of studying French which*<sup>4</sup> include getting a job and being able to travel. For these reasons *I*<sup>5</sup> encourage you to accept the challenge and learn French.

- (1) The dependent clause is joined to the preceding independent clause.
- (2) The verb “to be” is inserted.
- (3) The subordinating word is removed to change a dependent clause to an independent clause.
- (4) An independent clause is inserted and joined to a dependent clause.
- (5) The subject “I” is inserted.

### Example 2

I prefer living in smaller communities. While they may not offer all the services of larger cities. They are advantageous in many ways. Less pollution, less noise and fewer people. Knowing your neighbours is another advantage. Being part of a community. Having a feeling of belonging is rare in high-rise apartments. Because they are overcrowded and poorly designed. Perhaps living away from the city means fewer choices for entertainment, shopping and excitement, but means more time for family and friends.

### A corrected version

I prefer living in smaller communities. While they may not offer all the services of larger cities, *they*<sup>1</sup> are advantageous in many ways. Less pollution, less noise and fewer people *are among the benefits of small town living*<sup>2</sup>. Knowing your neighbours *and being part of a community are other advantages*<sup>3</sup>. Having a feeling of belonging is rare in high-rise apartments. *Their poor design and overcrowded population add to the feeling of isolation*<sup>4</sup>. Perhaps living away from the city means fewer choices for entertainment, shopping and excitement, but *this sacrifice*<sup>5</sup> means more time for family and friends.

(1) The dependent clause was joined to the next independent clause.

(2) An explanation of the significance of these three phenomenon was added to them, turning the construction from a mere list into a complete thought.

(3) A sentence and a sentence fragment were combined to form a new sentence.

(4) The dependent clause (*because they are overcrowded and poorly designed*) was rewritten to form an independent clause. As an alternative correction, it could have been joined to the preceding independent clause.

(5) A subject for the verb “means” was added to the sentence.

### **For further practice, try these on your own!**

### Example 3

When preparing a meal, you should pay special attention to proper food handling techniques. Following these guidelines. Which can help to keep you and your family, safe and healthy. First, you should wash your hands. Before handling any food. You should also ensure that dishes, utensils and work surfaces are clean. Next, food needs to be stored in the refrigerator until it is used. In addition, all fruits and

vegetables must be washed thoroughly. Because there could be chemicals or bacteria on their peel. When cooking with meat, ensure it fully cooked. Fully cooked before serving so any bacteria are killed by the heat. Finally, you serve food on clean dishes, not those which previous held raw meat or unwashed produce. This may appear to be time-consuming work. But it can save your life.

*Example 4*

I often wonder. While looking out my window. How far do birds travel to land here? And sit in the tree by my house. And then, I think about the power it takes to fly an airplane. And see how small the birds are. They must be very well adapted to survive their yearly migrations. As they travel north and south with the changing seasons. If I was a bird. I might choose to stay in warmer climates all year. Instead of flying north. Where it is colder. That is definitely what I would do. If given a choice. I can only imagine the adventures my flying friends have experienced. Traveling much further than I have. Maybe than I ever will. Must finish my physics homework. So I can someday to learn fly. An airplane to these far off places.

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