

9

Writing Complete Sentences



Sentence Fragments

A **sentence** is a word group that has a subject and a verb and expresses a complete thought. A **sentence fragment**, a word group that does not have all the basic parts of a complete sentence, does not express a complete thought. It is missing some important information.

Sentence fragments usually occur when you write in a hurry or become a little careless. You may leave out a word, or you may chop off part of a sentence by putting in a period too soon.

To find out whether you have a complete sentence or a sentence fragment, you can use a simple three-part test:

1. Does the group of words have a subject?
2. Does it have a verb?
3. Does it express a complete thought?

If you answer *no* to any of these questions, your word group is a fragment. It is missing at least one basic part.

FRAGMENT Was the best sharpshooter in the United States. [The subject is missing. Who was the best sharpshooter in the United States?]

SENTENCE Annie Oakley was the best sharpshooter in the United States.

FRAGMENT Annie Oakley with Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West show. [The verb is missing. What did she do with the Wild West show?]

SENTENCE Annie Oakley performed with Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West show.

FRAGMENT As it fell through the air ninety feet away. [This group of words has a subject (*it*) and a verb (*fell*), but it does not express a complete thought. What happened as something fell through the air?]

SENTENCE Annie could shoot a playing card as it fell through the air ninety feet away.

NOTE By itself, a fragment does not express a complete thought. However, fragments can make sense if they are clearly related to the sentences that come before or after them. These sentences give the fragments meaning because they help the reader fill in the missing parts.

The following passage is from an essay that describes the death and the cutting down of a great white oak on the writer's family homestead. The author's grandfather has carefully cut at the dead tree and is about to aim the final blows. See how the author uses fragments to describe the fall of the great tree.

Then came the great moment. A few last, quick strokes. A slow, deliberate swaying. The crack of parting fibers. Then a long "swoo-sh!" that rose in pitch as the towering trunk arced downward at increasing speed.

Edwin Way Teale, "The Death of a Tree"

Experienced writers like Teale sometimes use sentence fragments to achieve a certain effect. As a developing writer, however, you need to practice and master writing complete sentences before you begin to experiment with writing fragments.



Annie Oakley

Exercise 1 Identifying Sentence Fragments

Some of the following items are sentence fragments. To find out which items are fragments and which are complete sentences, apply the three-part test on page 320. If the item is a complete sentence, write *C*. If a subject is missing, write *S*. If a verb is missing, write *V*. If the item has a subject and verb but does not express a complete thought, write *N*.

EXAMPLE 1. After he wrote "A Christmas Memory."

1. *N*

1. Truman Capote was an American author.
2. Was born in New Orleans in 1924.
3. Grew up in Alabama.
4. Because he hated attending boarding schools.
5. A movie made from *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, probably his most famous novel.
6. When he moved to New York City.
7. Capote's short story "A Christmas Memory" was made into a television movie.
8. His characters lively and eccentric.
9. Is one of his most moving stories.
10. Spent six years researching the nonfiction book that he titled *In Cold Blood*.

TIPS & TRICKS

To find phrase fragments in your writing, read the sentences in your paragraphs from the last to the first. Reading this way helps you to listen for complete thoughts that make sense.

Reference Note

For more on **verbals** (participles, gerunds, and infinitives), see page 449.

Phrase Fragments

A **phrase** is a group of words that does not have a subject and a verb and that is used as a single part of speech. There are three kinds of phrases that can easily be mistaken for complete sentences: *verbal phrases*, *appositive phrases*, and *prepositional phrases*.

Verbal Phrases

Verbals, forms of verbs that are used as other parts of speech, sometimes fool us into thinking that a group of words has a verb when it really does not. Some verbals end in *-ing*, *-d*, or *-ed* and do not have helping verbs (such as *is*, *were*, or *have*) in front of them. Other verbals have the word *to* in front of the base form (*to go*, *to play*).

A **verbal phrase** is a phrase that contains a verbal. By itself, a verbal phrase is a fragment because it does not express a complete thought.

FRAGMENT Learning about the Civil War.

SENTENCE I enjoyed learning about the Civil War.

FRAGMENT Gaining glory for itself and for all black soldiers.

SENTENCE Gaining glory for itself and for all black soldiers, the 54th Massachusetts Regiment led the attack on Fort Wagner.

FRAGMENT To become good soldiers.

SENTENCE Black volunteers trained hard to become good soldiers.

FRAGMENT Inspired by the 54th Massachusetts Regiment.

SENTENCE Inspired by the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, other black soldiers fought bravely.

Appositive Phrases

An **appositive** is a word that identifies or explains the noun or pronoun it follows. An **appositive phrase**, a phrase made up of an appositive and its modifiers, is a fragment. It does not contain the basic parts of a sentence.

FRAGMENT A twenty-five-year-old soldier.

SENTENCE The 54th Massachusetts Regiment was commanded by Colonel Shaw, a twenty-five-year-old soldier.

Prepositional Phrases

A **prepositional phrase** is a group of words beginning with a preposition and ending with a noun or pronoun. A prepositional phrase cannot stand alone as a sentence because it does not express a complete thought.

FRAGMENT With great courage on the battlefield.

SENTENCE The 54th Massachusetts Regiment acted with great courage on the battlefield.



The 54th Massachusetts Regiment

NOTE Usually a phrase needs to stay as close as possible to the word it modifies in a sentence. However, some phrases, such as the infinitive phrase “to become good soldiers,” can make sense at the beginning or the end of a sentence.

Reference Note

For more on **placing phrases in sentences**, see pages 585 and 587.

Exercise 2 Revising Phrase Fragments

Use your imagination to create sentences from the following phrases. You can either (1) attach the fragment to a complete sentence, or (2) develop the phrase into a complete sentence by adding a subject, a verb, or both.

EXAMPLE 1. landing on the planet
1. *Landing on the planet, the astronauts immediately began to explore.*

or

The astronauts were landing on the planet.

1. in a huge spaceship
2. setting foot on the planet
3. to explore the craters

4. walking around in a spacesuit
5. finding no sign of life
6. the astronauts' spaceship
7. checking the spaceship for damage
8. the planet's moon
9. to return to Earth
10. on a successful mission

Subordinate Clause Fragments

A **clause** is a group of words that has a subject and a verb. One kind of clause, an **independent clause**, expresses a complete thought and can stand on its own as a sentence. For example, the group of words *I ate my lunch* is an independent clause. However, another kind of clause, a **subordinate clause**, does not express a complete thought and cannot stand by itself as a sentence.

FRAGMENT When Paris carried off the beautiful Helen of Troy. [What happened when Paris carried off Helen?]

SENTENCE When Paris carried off the beautiful Helen of Troy, he started the Trojan War.

FRAGMENT Who was a great hero of the Greeks. [Note that this would be a complete sentence if it ended with a question mark.]

SENTENCE Odysseus, who was a great hero of the Greeks, took part in the Trojan War.

FRAGMENT Because the wooden horse concealed Greek soldiers. [What was the result of the concealment?]

SENTENCE Because the wooden horse concealed Greek soldiers, the Greeks finally won the Trojan War.

NOTE A subordinate clause telling *why*, *where*, *when*, or *how* is called an **adverb clause**. Usually you can place an adverb clause either before or after the independent clause in a sentence.

EXAMPLE **After he started home from the Trojan War**, Odysseus had many more adventures.

or

Odysseus had many more adventures **after he started home from the Trojan War**.

If you put the subordinate clause first, use a comma to separate it from the independent clause. The comma makes the sentence easier for the reader to understand.

Reference Note

For more on **punctuating introductory adverb clauses**, see page 653.

Exercise 3 Revising Subordinate Clause Fragments

The following paragraph contains some subordinate clause fragments. First, find these clause fragments. Next, revise the paragraph, joining the subordinate clauses with independent clauses. (There may be more than one way to join them.) Change the punctuation and capitalization as necessary.

People have been using cosmetics for thousands of years. In Africa, the ancient Egyptians used perfumes, hair dyes, and makeup. That they made from plants and minerals. While they often used cosmetics to be more attractive. They also used them to protect their skin from the hot sun. Today, cosmetics are made from over five thousand different ingredients, including waxes, oils, and dyes. The cosmetics business is a huge industry. Advertisers are extremely successful in selling cosmetics. Because they appeal to our desire to be attractive. They often hint. That their products will make us beautiful, happy, and successful. Although modern-day cosmetics ads look different from the ads of eighty years ago. They still appeal to our emotions.

Exercise 4 Using Subordinate Clauses in Sentences

Use each of the following subordinate clause fragments as part of a complete sentence. Add whatever words are necessary to make the meaning of the sentence complete. Add capitalization and punctuation as necessary.

1. as we watched the spaceship land
2. who approached the house in long leaps
3. which startled the dog
4. if we go outside the house
5. when they handed me a glowing sphere

NOTE A **series of items** is another kind of fragment that is easily mistaken for a sentence. Notice that, in the following example, the series of items in dark type is not a complete sentence.

FRAGMENT I ate several things for lunch. **A sandwich, an apple, four pieces of celery, and some popcorn.**

To correct the fragment, you can

- make it into a complete sentence

or

- link it to the previous sentence with a colon

SENTENCE I ate several things for lunch. I ate a sandwich, an apple, four pieces of celery, and some popcorn.

or

I ate several things for lunch: a sandwich, an apple, four pieces of celery, and some popcorn.



**Go to the Chapter Menu
for an interactive activity.**

Reference Note

For more on **punctuating introductory phrases**, see page 653.

Review A Identifying and Revising Fragments

Some of the following groups of words are sentence fragments. Identify each fragment, and make it part of a complete sentence, adding commas where necessary. When you find a complete sentence, write C.

EXAMPLE 1. Originally raised to hunt badgers. Dachshunds are now popular as pets.
1. *Originally raised to hunt badgers, dachshunds are now popular as pets.*

1. Humans have kept dogs as pets and helpers. For perhaps ten thousand years.
2. Herding sheep and cattle and guarding property. Many dogs more than earn their keep.
3. Descended from wolves. Some dogs are still somewhat wolflike.
4. There are over one hundred breeds of dogs now.
5. If you have a Saint Bernard. You have one of the largest dogs.
6. Because Yorkshire terriers are very tiny and cute. Many people keep them as pets.
7. Since they are all born blind and unable to take care of themselves. Puppies need their mothers.
8. Most dogs are fully grown by the time they are one year old.

9. Dogs live an average of twelve years. Although many live to be nearly twenty.
10. If you like dogs. Consider having one for a pet.

Run-on Sentences

A **run-on sentence** is two or more complete sentences run together as one. Because they do not show where one idea ends and another one begins, run-on sentences can confuse your reader. There are two kinds of run-ons. In the first kind, called a **fused sentence**, the sentences have no punctuation at all between them.

- RUN-ON** Schools in the Middle Ages were different from ours students usually did not have books.
- CORRECT** Schools in the Middle Ages were different from ours. Students usually did not have books.

In the other kind of run-on, the writer has linked together sentences with only a comma to separate them from one another. This kind of run-on is called a **comma splice**.

- RUN-ON** Schools today have books for every student, many schools also have televisions and computers.
- CORRECT** Schools today have books for every student. Many schools also have televisions and computers.

Revising Run-on Sentences

There are several ways you can revise run-on sentences. As shown in the examples above, you can always make two separate sentences. However, if the two thoughts are equal to one another in importance, you may want to make a **compound sentence**.

- RUN-ON** Canada has ten provinces each province has its own government. [fused]
- Canada has ten provinces, each province has its own government. [comma splice]
1. You can make a compound sentence by using a comma and a coordinating conjunction (such as *and*, *but*, or *or*).
- CORRECTED** Canada has ten provinces, **and** each province has its own government.

COMPUTER TIP



You can use a grammar-checking program to flag sentences in your writing that are longer than a certain number of words—sentences that have a higher chance of being run-ons. You can then use the information in this chapter to determine whether or not the flagged sentences are run-ons.

TIPS & TRICKS

To spot run-on sentences, read your writing aloud. Each point where you hear yourself making a pause as you read is a point where you should ask, *Do I need to create separate sentences here? Do I need to add a semicolon or period? Do I need a comma and a conjunction instead? Do I need additional punctuation here?*

2. You can make a compound sentence by using a semicolon.

CORRECTED Canada has ten provinces; each province has its own government.

3. You can make a compound sentence by using a semicolon and a word such as *therefore*, *instead*, *meanwhile*, *still*, *also*, *nevertheless*, or *however*. These words are called **conjunctive adverbs**. Follow a conjunctive adverb with a comma.

CORRECTED Canada has ten provinces; **also**, each province has its own government.

Reference Note

For more on **compound sentences**, see page 335.

NOTE Before you join two sentences in a compound sentence, make sure that the ideas in the sentences are closely related to one another. If you link unrelated ideas, you may confuse your reader.

UNRELATED Canada is almost four million square miles in size, and I hope to visit my relatives there someday.

RELATED Canada is almost four million square miles in size, but most of its people live on a small strip of land along the southern border.

Exercise 5 Revising Run-on Sentences

The following items are confusing because they are run-on sentences. Clear up the confusion by revising the run-ons to form clear, complete sentences. To revise, use the method given in parentheses after each sentence. (The examples on pages 327 and 328 will help you.)

EXAMPLE 1. Hollywood is still a center of American moviemaking fine films are made in other places, too. (Use a comma and a coordinating conjunction.)

1. *Hollywood is still a center of American moviemaking, but fine films are made in other places, too.*

1. Movies entertain millions of people every day they are popular all over the world. (Make two sentences.)
2. Many films take years to make they require the skills of hundreds of workers. (Use a comma and a coordinating conjunction.)



George Eastman and Thomas Edison

3. The director of a movie has an important job the cast and crew all follow the director's instructions. (Use a semicolon.)
4. The director makes many decisions, the producers take care of the business end of moviemaking. (Use a semicolon and a conjunctive adverb.)
5. The first movie theaters opened in the early 1900s they were called nickelodeons. (Make two sentences.)
6. Thomas Edison was a pioneer in early moviemaking he invented the first commercial motion-picture machine. (Use a semicolon.)
7. The machine was called a kinetoscope, it was a cabinet that showed moving images through a peephole. (Make two sentences.)
8. Early movies were silent, sometimes offscreen actors at movie theaters would fill in the dialogue for the audience. (Use a comma and a coordinating conjunction.)
9. The first sound films were shown in the late 1920s they marked a milestone in moviemaking history. (Use a semicolon.)
10. Movies are great entertainment they are also an art form. (Use a semicolon and a conjunctive adverb.)

Review B Revising Fragments and Run-on Sentences

The following paragraph contains several sentence fragments and run-on sentences. First, identify all fragments or run-ons. Then, revise them, adding words and changing the punctuation and capitalization as necessary to make each sentence clear and complete.

During the Civil War. Women nurses showed remarkable heroism. They took care of sick and wounded soldiers, they risked their lives carrying supplies. To military hospitals. Sally L. Tompkins one such woman. She ran a military hospital in the South she was one of two women captains in the Confederate Army. Clara Barton was another heroic Civil War nurse, she worked tirelessly. Caring for sick and wounded soldiers in the North. In 1864, Barton superintendent of nurses for the Union Army. She later founded the American Red Cross Society. Served as president of the Red Cross. Until 1904.



Clara Barton

Go to the Chapter Menu for an interactive activity.