

Writing and Punctuating Complete Sentences

The information below covers some basic features of sentence writing:

- ❑ What it takes to make a complete sentence
- ❑ How to use commas and semicolons in complete sentences
- ❑ How to correct incomplete sentences (called fragments), run-on sentences and comma splices

Incomplete sentences or fragments

An incomplete sentence, or sentence fragment, is part of a sentence (a phrase or clause) punctuated as if it were a whole sentence. Fragments are common in everyday speech, for example: *See you later. Could be trouble. Just a minute.*

They also appear in informal writing, for example: *Just a note to let you know I got the loan. Sure will make things easier next semester.*

Because they are informal, they're also used in advertising, journalism and literature, such as, *Better living through chemistry. The pause that refreshes. Freshens your mouth.*

You should not use them, however, in most formal, academic writing.

Criteria for sentence completeness

- ❑ A sentence must include a subject and a finite verb. That is, any form of the verb except the infinitive, for example, *to know, to see, to shout*.
- ❑ A sentence cannot consist of a dependent clause alone. A dependent clause has a subject and verb and begins with a word or phrase such as the following:

Subordinating conjunctions	Relative pronouns
<i>after, although, as, as if, because, before, even though, if, since, so that, than, that, though, unless, until, when, where, whether, how, why, while</i>	<i>who, whom, whose, which, that</i>

The following are examples of dependent clauses:

Because the parking lot was full

When more than six people get on the elevator

Which made us all late

- ❑ A sentence must have a subject and verb and cannot consist of only a phrase, such as, *in the morning, on the advice of a friend, through the door*.

Punctuation: some basic rules

Commas are typically used to add information to a basic sentence unit (called the main or independent clause). There are four types of sentences that need a comma or commas to communicate a complete thought.

- ❑ Sentences with an **introducer** require a comma, especially if the introducer is more than two or three words.

After the game ended, we went to Santa Monica for dinner.

- ❑ A simple sentence interrupted by a word, phrase or clause that is not an essential part of the sentence (an **interrupter**) is set off by a *pair* of commas.

We decided, after a long discussion, to go to Santa Monica for dinner.

- ❑ If a basic sentence is complete but has words, a phrase or a clause at the end, it contains a **concluder**. Use a comma when (a) the phrase or clause refers back to the beginning or middle of the sentence (b) it begins with a relative pronoun, or (c) the concluder shows an extreme contrast (*although, unless*).

a) I had to park in the street when I came to school this morning, because the parking lots were full

b) There was an accident on the freeway, which made us all late.

c) I usually park in the parking garage, although today it was closed for repairs.

- ❑ A comma is also used between two simple sentences joined by any of the **conjunctions** *or, for, so, yet, but, and*.

The battery in my car was dead, so we took Jody's car to Santa Monica.

Using colons and semicolons

Instead of a comma and conjunction, you may join two complete sentences together with a semicolon. This structure is often used when the two sentences are closely related and their meanings are somewhat contrasting.

The first chapter had been short and inspiring; the last was long and boring.

A colon can be used when a complete sentence offers some information or idea that is not complete. A colon can be placed after such a sentence, and then the completing information (either a sentence or non-sentence, often a list) is placed after the colon.

When the weather changed, the effect was readily apparent: they would have to return immediately to port.

One obstacle remained: the demand for job security.

Mistakes involving commas and other punctuation

The most typical problem students run into when trying to vary their sentence structure with more complex sentences is the **run-on**. A run-on sentence is one in which two independent and complete sentences are improperly joined together, either with (a) no punctuation where it is needed or (b) a comma instead of a semicolon. The latter type is also referred to as a **comma splice**.

a) Phyllis got off the plane in New York her bags continued on to Boston.

b) A black-crowned night heron stood among the rushes, at dusk it would come out to hunt.