

Sentence Fragments

This resource is designed for English Language Learners (ELLs) who require assistance in a particular academic skill. Each handout provides brief explanations related to different core skills (reading, writing, listening, and/or speaking), and it offers some simple examples of mistakes and how these might be corrected.

While these handouts are designed primarily for ELL students, anyone seeking to improve their writing may find these documents useful. Check out the links at the end of the handout for more resources.

A complete sentence has at least one **independent clause** (also known as **main clause**).

An **independent clause**, known as a **main clause**, is a group of words that contains a subject and a verb and expresses a complete thought. An independent clause can stand alone as a sentence. In other words, it does not need any additional information to operate as a sentence. The sentence "He does not travel" is an example of an independent clause.

<https://www.nmu.edu/writingcenter/independentdependent-clauses>

Example:

✓ John was walking.

The subject is "John" and the verb is "was walking."

An incomplete sentence is called a **sentence fragment**.

A **sentence fragment** is part of a sentence and cannot stand on its own as a sentence. It lacks a subject or a verb or both.

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/mechanics/sentence_fragments.html

How to identify a sentence fragment?

It only has a **dependent clause** (also known as **subordinate clause**).

A **dependent clause**, known as **subordinate clause**, is a group of words that contains a subject and a verb but does not express a complete thought. It is not a sentence and needs an independent clause to complete the idea. For example, "**because** he does not travel" is not a complete sentence. Often a dependent clause is marked by a **subordinating conjunction** such as the marker "because" in the above example.

<https://www.nmu.edu/writingcenter/independentdependent-clauses>

A **subordinating conjunction** is a word that connects a dependent clause to an independent clause and shows a relationship between them, such as *when, while, before, after, although, as, since*.

<https://www.bbc.com/bitesize/articles/zqk37p3>

These are more examples of subordinate conjunctions:

- After
- Although
- As
- As if
- Because
- Before
- Even if
- Even though
- In order to
- Since
- Though
- Unless
- Until
- Whatever
- When
- Whenever
- Whether
- While

Fixing sentence fragments

1. The sentence fragment is a dependent clause.

✗ When George moved to Hawaii last year to enjoy the warm weather and surfing.

This is a sentence fragment because it starts with the subordinate conjunction "when," making it a dependent clause.

✓ George moved to Hawaii last year to enjoy the warm weather and surfing.

Removing "when" changed the clause from the dependent clause to the independent clause. The sentence has a subject (*George*) and a verb (*moved*), expressing a complete thought.

✓ When George moved to Hawaii last year, **he enjoyed** the warm weather and the surfing.

This is correct because “when” remains as a subordinate conjunction, marking the clause as dependent. It correctly links to the independent clause “he enjoyed the warm weather and the surfing.”

2. The sentence fragment does not have a verb

The sentence fragment lacks a main **verb**.

A **verb** is a word or a phrase that describes an action, condition, or experience, such as “sing,” “keep,” and “feel.”
<https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Verb>

Examples:

✗ A story with deep thoughts and emotions.

There is a subject (a “story”) but it has no action attached to it. Here are two possible solutions:

✓ **She told** a story with deep thoughts and emotions.
The sentence has a new subject “she” and a verb “told.”

✓ A story with deep themes and emotions **is** enjoyable.
The original subject now has a verb “is.”

In the following example, the last part, “Particularly at the beach” is a sentence fragment as it lacks a verb.

✗ Last year, George moved to Hawaii to enjoy the warm weather and surfing. **Particularly at the beach.**

You can correct it by adding a subject and a verb:

✓ Last year, George moved to Hawaii to enjoy the warm weather and the surfing. **He** particularly **enjoyed** his time at the beach.

You can also change the punctuation to connect “Particularly at the beach” to the independent clause before it.

✓ Last year, George moved to Hawaii to enjoy the warm weather and surfing, particularly at the beach.

In the example below, there is a verb in the sentence fragment. However, it is still incomplete:

✗ The basketball team **affected** by the loss of their best player, Tommy, due to injury.

This sentence fragment can be fixed by changing the participle “affected” to the verb “was affected”:

The basketball team was affected by the loss of their best player, Tommy, due to injury.

Participles include **present participles** and **past participles**. The -ing ending is added to the root of a verb to create a **present participle** (e.g., *paint* becomes *painting*). The -ed ending is added to the root of a verb to create a **past participle** (e.g., *paint* becomes *painted*).

3. The sentence fragment does not have a subject

The **subject** of a sentence names who or what the sentence is about. e.g., *He opened the door—He* is the subject.

<http://guidetogrammar.org/grammar/subjects.htm>

Examples:

✗ George's financial situation improved in 2015. Bought himself a nice new car.

This sentence fragment can be fixed by adding a pronoun:

✓ George's financial situation improved in 2015. **He** bought himself a nice new car.

When a sentence begins with a **preposition**, it lacks a subject. In some cases, you may remove a preposition to ensure that there is a subject.

A **preposition** is a small word that shows the relationship between parts of a sentence, like "on," "in," "under," and "at."

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_English_prepositions

Examples:

✗ With the ultimate effect of all advertising is to sell the product.
The ultimate effect of all advertising is to sell the product. Without the preposition “With,” the subject of the sentence now is “The ultimate effect.”

✗ By paying too much attention to public opinion surveys can make a political leader afraid of proposing new policies.

Paying too much attention to public opinion surveys can make a political leader afraid of proposing new policies. Without the preposition “By,” the subject of the sentence is now “a political leader.”

To fix the sentence fragment, you can rearrange the sentence or remove a preposition to ensure that you have a complete sentence.

- ✗ For working secretly for a business competitor got Jenna fired.
- ✓ Jenna got fired for doing secret work for a business competitor.
- ✓ Doing secret work for a business competitor got Jenna fired.

Practice Exercises:

Sentence elements:

Identify subjects, verbs, objects, and prepositional phrases in the following sentences.

1. Alex needs new batteries for his camera.
2. Dogs were trapped in the shower.
3. Zia wore her blue suit to the meeting.
4. Dark clouds appeared in the sky.

Fix the following sentence fragments:

- | |
|---|
| 5. On the menu a wide range of food choices to choose from. They all looked so delicious that it was difficult to make a selection. |
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|--|
| 6. In high school, every student must take one music class. Because the school promotes education in the arts. |
| |

7. They were all having a good time. Until one of Tina's friends got into an argument.

Identify the sentence fragments in the paragraphs below and correct them:

8. The rainforests of the Amazon basin are being destroyed by logging and fires. Even though environmentalists have been demanding the end of logging for decades. The profits from farming rainforest land are too great for many landowners to resist. Because the rainforests are such an important resource for rare plants and animals and climate regulation, the government must pass laws banning logging immediately.
9. Many people love to watch salsa dancing videos but not many people know the dance moves. However, salsa dancing is taught for free every Saturday night at the Lula Lounge. Which is located in the heart of the Little Italy neighbourhood on College Street in Toronto. Even beginners who have never danced salsa before can come and enjoy the introductory classes.
10. On warm sunny days, there is nothing I like better than riding my bicycle. The Greater Toronto Area has many amazing bike paths, but my favourite is the Don Valley trail in east Toronto. Running for many kilometers along the Don River. You can cycle from North York all the way to Lake Ontario.

Answers:

Sentence elements:

1. **Subject:** Alex
Verb: needs
Object: batteries
Prepositional phrase: for his camera
2. **Subject:** Dogs
Verb: were trapped
Prepositional phrase: In the shower
3. **Subject:** Zia
Verb: wore
Object: blue suit
Prepositional phrase: to the meeting
4. **Subject:** clouds
Verb: appeared
Prepositional phrase: in the sky

Fix the Sentence Fragments

5. On the menu **there was** a wide range of food choices to choose from. They all looked so delicious that it was difficult to make a selection.
6. In high school, every student must take one music class **because** the school promotes education in the arts.
7. They were all having a good time **until** one of Tina's friends got into an argument.

Identify and Correct the Sentence Fragments

The sentence fragments from each paragraph are listed below.

8. ... the end of logging for decades, the profits from farming...
9. ... the Lula Lounge **which** is located in the heart...
10. ... along the Don River, you can cycle from North York.

More resources for sentence fragments

Sentence Fragments – UofT Writing Advice

<http://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/revising/sentence-fragments/>

Recognizing and avoiding sentence fragments – University of Waterloo

<https://uwaterloo.ca/writing-and-communication-centre/recognizing-and-avoiding-sentence-fragments>

Sentence Fragments – University of Maryland

<https://www.umuc.edu/current-students/learning-resources/writing-center/writing-resources/grammar-help/sentence-fragments.cfm>

Develop your academic language, improve your academic skills, and get a Co-Curricular Record notation. Attend the Professional English Language Skills (PELS) workshops:

<https://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/professional-english-language-skills-pels>

Get feedback on your writing and discuss your thought process. Book an appointment with an instructor: <http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/appointments-undergraduate>.

Looking for more learning strategies? Visit us at: <http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/>.