

Sentences, Clauses, Phrases, and Common Problems with Sentences

Sentences

Sentences consist of a subject and a predicate.

Subject: The topic of a sentence that often appears first and is invariably a noun or noun phrase that answers the “Who or What?” about the predicate:

- *My dog and I ate lunch.*
- *Holding hands in the hallways was forbidden.*

Predicate: The comment the sentence makes about its subject, which includes the verb and all complements in the sentence:

- *A submarine volcano, which has been active for several years, is in the process of forming a new Hawaiian Island.*

Clauses

A clause is a group of related words containing a subject and verb and of two kinds.

- **Independent: a sentence**
Tyrone smelled the gas.
- **Dependent: an incomplete sentence**
When Tyrone smelled the gas, he relit the pilot light.
Dependent clauses do not stand alone; they are incomplete sentences unless they are combined with an independent clause.
 - **Essential Clause (restrictive modifier):** limits the meaning to a subset of the subject or noun. If this part of the sentence is removed, the meaning of the sentence changes.
Little children who misbehave are unwelcome.
 - **Nonessential Clause (nonrestrictive modifier):** provides additional information about the subject or noun. If this part of the sentence is removed, the meaning of the sentence still remains the same.
Little children, whose hands are smaller than adults, have trouble playing chords.

Phrases:

A phrase is a group of words performing a single grammatical function.

- *The person by the bridge is my friend.*
- *Riding the clutch causes excessive wear.*
- **Coordinate Conjunctions:** words that join words or groups of words of the same kind or rank (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so [FANBOYS]; either . . . or, neither . . . nor)
 - *Heliana and I tried to study all night, but neither she nor I could stay awake.*
- **Subordinate Conjunctions:** words that connect adverb or noun clauses with some other word or clause (although, because, thus, nevertheless, whether, while, as, before, since, when, after)
 - *Although we were nervous, we passed the exam.*

Common Problems with Sentences

Here are some common problems in writing:

- Sentence Fragments
- Fused Sentences
- Comma Splices
- Sentence Sprawl
- Misplaced Modifiers
- Faulty Parallelism

Sentence Fragments

Sentence fragments are groups of words that do not create an independent clause. Independent clauses must have a subject and a verb; sentence fragments will usually lack a subject and/or subject **and** verb. For example:

- *Heading into town for the day.*

“Heading into town for the day” may be something you might text to a friend or family member, but when writing, you should be explicit in who is doing what. The word “heading” may sound like a verb, but it’s actually a verbal. Verbals are words that look like verbs, but function as either a noun or adjective. In the first example, “heading” is an adjective; it describes what you are doing.

To fix the example, you would need to have a subject and a verb, such as: ***I am heading into town for the day.***

Fused/Run-On Sentences

Fused/run-on sentences are sentences which have two independent clauses that are not joined correctly. Take a look at the example below:

Let’s go to the Asian Star they have great food.

The example above is one sentence with two independent clauses, but they aren’t joined correctly or separated into two sentences.

Comma Splices

Comma splices are two independent clauses incorrectly separated by a comma. See the example below:

Kim needs to pay her library fines, otherwise she won’t be able to graduate.

Both *Kim needs to pay her fines* and *she won’t be able to graduate* have a subject and a verb, but they need something besides a comma to separate them. To revise this sentence, the independent clauses can be joined by a coordinating conjunction. A new version of this sentence could read:

*Kim needs to pay her library fines, **or** she won’t be able to graduate.*

Using coordinating conjunctions are not the only fix to comma splices. We could add a preposition—a word that describes a relationship or placement—to fix the sentence:

If Kim doesn't pay her library fines, she won't be able to graduate.

Sentence Sprawl

Sentence sprawl is a sentence with three or more independent clauses. Independent clauses are usually joined together with conjunctions, leading to confusing, very long sentences. These errors are common in academic writing. In academic writing, sentence sprawl is easy to do because we have a lot we want to say in limited space. For example:

I was waiting for you but you never showed up so I wasn't sure what I should do and I was really nervous that I had missed you.

These independent clauses:

1. *I was waiting for you*
2. *You never showed up*
3. *I wasn't sure what I should do*
4. *I was nervous that I had missed you*

When you write sentences, try to keep your sentences simple. Two independent clauses should be the maximum number of independent clauses in your sentences. Using this thought, the example can be rewritten as:

I was waiting for you, but you never showed up. I wasn't sure what I should do, and I was really nervous that I had missed you.

By simply adding a period to separate related ideas, the new sentences are much easier to read.

Misplaced Modifiers

Modifiers are words that modify (add detail to) nouns in a sentence. For example:

Green purse

The word *green* tells us more detail about the purse.

Modifiers should be next to the noun they modify. When they are not, they become misplaced and can incorrectly modify other nouns. In the following example, the modifiers are not placed correctly:

Bleak and dusty the horse walked along the trail.

In the example, *bleak and dusty* are the modifiers, but what do they modify? Because the modifiers are right next to *the horse*, a reader might assume the horse was bleak and dusty; however, the writer is describing the trail. To fix this, the modifiers should be moved near the noun they modify:

The horse walked along the bleak and dusty trail.

Faulty Parallelism

Grammatical parallelism is keeping things grammatically alike, like using all verbs when listing items or beginning all sentences with a noun. For example:

I am going to:

- *Draw*
- *Exercise*
- *Shower*

In the above example, each bullet is a verb. Being grammatically parallel also applies to sentences:

It is more fun to hike than swimming.

In the example, *to hike* and *swimming* describe activities, but one description (*to hike*) is an infinitive—the raw form of a verb (to + a verb) and the other description (*swimming*) is a gerund—a verb that acts as a noun by ending in -ing. To make the example parallel, we need *to hike* and *swimming* to be the same—either both infinitives or both gerunds. To revise this sentence, we could write:

To hike is more fun than to swim.

or

Hiking is more fun than swimming.