



WRITING CENTER

Sentence Fragments

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Sentence fragments occur when clauses or groups of words are strung together and appear to look like a sentence but in fact are not complete sentences. All sentences must have a subject and a verb; if one of these is missing, the sentence is a fragment.

SENTENCE STRUCTURE

A sentence is a group of words containing a subject and verb. This grammatical structure is called a clause. Every sentence is made up of one or more clauses.

There are two main types of clauses: **independent** (or **main**), and **dependent** (or **subordinate**).

INDEPENDENT CLAUSE

An independent clause is the main clause of the sentence—without at least one independent clause, the sentence would not make sense.

Independent clauses:

- Consist of a subject and verb
- Stand alone as a complete sentence
- Express a complete thought

Note: In the example below, nouns are **bolded** and verbs are underlined.

Example: **She** went to the Writing Center.
George graduated in the spring.

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DEPENDENT CLAUSE

A dependent clause is subordinate to the main clause of the sentence.

Dependent clauses:

- Consist of a subject and verb
- Cannot stand alone as a complete sentence
- Requires more information from the main clause to make it a complete thought

A **fragment** is a dependent clause that stands separate from an independent clause.

Examples: INCORRECT: Since he has a bad back.

CORRECT: Since he has a bad back I gave him assistance.

INCORRECT: Finished the paper.

CORRECT: It was midnight before I finished the paper.

One way to recognize dependent clauses is to find the clause that begins with a subordinating conjunction. If the clause beginning with a subordinating conjunction is the only clause in the sentence, the sentence is most likely a fragment.

THE MOST COMMON SUBORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS

after	how	than	whether
although	if	until	while
as	in order that	when	why
as if	provided	where	whenever
because	since	whereas	though
except that	such as	that	unless

VERBAL PHRASES

Another common fragment error occurs when a verbal phrase is mistaken for a complete sentence. A verbal phrase most commonly begins with either an **-ing** word, or an infinitive (**to** plus a verb).

Example: To live close to the sea, calling his friends, arranging the carpool, and getting to the party on time.

Though they appear to be sentences because they contain verbs, verbal phrases are fragments—they cannot stand alone as complete, meaningful sentences.

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A verbal fragment can often be corrected by adding a subject and/or verb, or adding some other information to make a complete sentence.

Examples: INCORRECT: To live close to the sea.

CORRECT: His greatest desire was to live close to the sea.

INCORRECT: Calling her friends.

CORRECT: Calling her friends was the most enjoyable part of Jen's day.

PARENTHETIC ELEMENTS

Parenthetical elements are words and phrases that are intrusive and subordinate—they interrupt the normal sentence pattern to supply additional, supplementary information. When such an element is mistaken as a complete sentence, the result is a sentence fragment.

A parenthetical element should be joined to the sentence it relates to by a comma, dash, or parentheses.

Examples: INCORRECT: He turned to call an ambulance. His blood running cold at the extent of the man's injuries.

CORRECT: He turned to call an ambulance, his blood running cold at the extent of the man's injuries.

INCORRECT: They were supposed to meet at 3pm. In the atrium of the building.

CORRECT: They were supposed to meet at 3pm—in the atrium of the building.

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PRACTICE

RECOGNIZING AND AVOIDING FRAGMENTS

Indicate in the space at the right whether the following groups of words are complete sentences (C) or fragments of sentences (F).

Example: Rice University located in Houston, Texas. **(F)**

1. If your editor would contact me by the first of May. ()
2. The author focuses on problems which are pressing. ()
3. A number of observations indicate that the project will work. ()
4. Each campus organization establishes its own criteria for membership. ()
5. Atlanta is not only a historical city but also a beautiful one. ()

Some of the following word groups are fragments. Some are fragments and sentences. Some are complete sentences. Rewrite in such a way as to leave no fragments. If the word group is already a complete sentence, leave it as it is.

Example: INCORRECT: I moved to Seattle. Because I was offered a very promising job there.
CORRECT: I moved to Seattle because I was offered a very promising job there.

1. The Norsemen worshipped a group of anthropomorphic gods who lived in Asgard.
2. The Turks captured Constantinople in 1453. Keeping a foothold in eastern Europe.
3. The water moccasin slithered into the stream. Where it disappeared.
4. The scholarships established by Cecil J. Rhodes are called Rhodes Scholarships.
5. Phi Beta Kappa, founded at the College of William and Mary in 1776 as a debating and literary society.