

Avoiding Sentence Fragments

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn how to tell a sentence fragment from a complete sentence, and how to fix fragments in writing. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. What Are Sentence Fragments?
2. Identifying Sentence Fragments
3. Correcting Sentence Fragments

1. What Are Sentence Fragments?

A sentence is made up of a subject plus a verb plus a full thought, so a **sentence fragment** is just a fragment, or a scrap, of a sentence. It's a phrase or a clause that does not meet all the criteria of a sentence.

Sometimes these fragments are missing the verb, but most of the time, it's the subject that's been left out.

↪ **EXAMPLE** *Wanted to cross the bridge.*

See how there's a verb and part of a thought, but the subject is missing? Who wanted to cross the bridge?

A common fragmented sentence will be a dependent clause punctuated as if it were a full sentence. It may have a subject and a verb, but the complete thought is missing.

↪ **EXAMPLE** *Because the river was frozen.*

The word "because" is your clue that not everything is here. Sentence fragments are important to spot in your writing, since they can confuse your readers with unclear, half-formed ideas.



TERM TO KNOW

Sentence Fragment

A phrase or clause that does not meet all the criteria of a complete sentence.

2. Identifying Sentence Fragments

To identify a sentence fragment, ask yourself questions about a suspect sentence. These questions will help you sort out if a sentence is a fragment or complete:

- Does this sentence have a subject?
- Does this sentence have a verb?
- Does this sentence form a complete thought?

Since all complete sentences will include a subject, a verb, and a full thought, if you find yourself answering no to any of those questions, well, then you've got a sentence fragment.

What if you've asked yourself all three questions and you still aren't sure? Then you can use this trick: When you read your sentence, tack on the phrase "it is true that" to the beginning of that sentence. If the sentence still makes sense, then it's complete. If it doesn't, then you know you have a fragment.



TRY IT

Consider this sentence: *The cow jumped over the moon.*

Does this sentence have a subject and a verb?

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Yes, "the cow" is the subject and "jumped" is the verb.

Is this sentence a full thought?

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Yes. So, if we add "it is true that" to the beginning, it's still going to make sense: *It is true that the cow jumped over the moon.*



TRY IT

Consider this sentence: *When the cow jumped over the moon.*

Does this sentence have a subject and a verb?

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All that has changed is the word "when," so you know there is still a subject and a verb.

Is this sentence a full thought?

+

No. You can see that when you try your trick out, it doesn't make any sense: *It is true that when the cow jumped over the moon.*

3. Correcting Sentence Fragments

If your sentence is missing a subject or a verb, then all you have to do is add one in.



TRY IT

Consider this sentence: *The big, brown cow in the field of grass.*

Does this sentence have a subject and a verb?

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There is a subject, "the cow." Do you see any action? No, so the verb is missing.

How can this sentence be corrected?

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You can make this sentence complete by adding in a verb: *The big, brown cow sat in the field of grass.*



TRY IT

Consider this sentence: *Ate the soup with a spoon.*

Does this sentence have a subject and a verb?

+

You have a verb ("ate") and a noun ("spoon"), which could be the subject. But is the spoon doing the eating? No, so that is your clue that the subject is missing and needs to be added.

How can this sentence be corrected?

+

You can make this sentence complete by adding in a subject: *She ate the soup with a spoon.*

As mentioned earlier, there is another kind of fragment, which is a dependent clause incorrectly punctuated as a sentence. You'll see this happen when the independent clause either follows or leads the dependent sentence fragment in a paragraph.

⇒ EXAMPLE *Because she was hungry.*

This has a subject and a verb, but the word "because" signals that this is meant to complete a thought that isn't all here. To correct this, you just need to pair this sentence fragment with an independent clause to make it complete.

⇒ EXAMPLE *She served herself soup because she was hungry.*

Or, if you really wanted to, you could remove the subordinating conjunction (the word "because"), and then the dependent clause will be complete. "She was hungry" is an independent clause and a full sentence.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **sentence fragments** are phrases or clauses that are lacking some of the necessary elements to form a complete sentence. To **identify sentence fragments**, ask yourself if the sentence has both a subject and a verb and forms a complete thought. Once identified, you can **correct sentence fragments** by adding in the missing subject or verb, adding an independent clause, or removing a subordinating conjunction.

Best of luck in your learning!

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TERMS TO KNOW

Sentence Fragment

A phrase or clause that does not meet all the criteria of a complete sentence.