



The Writing Center

Fragments



What is a sentence?

The basic elements necessary to create a complete sentence are a *subject* and *verb* (a complete thought). This subject and verb need to be placed within the appropriate sentence boundaries: start with capitalizing the first letter of the first word in the sentence, and end the sentence by placing a period (.) after the last word.

- **Example of a basic simple sentence:** Jim ran.

The difficulty with sentence structure comes when you start adding more elements like prepositional phrases and descriptive words.

- **For example:** From a dead stop, aggravated by the less than interesting conversation, Jim ran away from the group of mind numbing people.
**Notice how much more difficult it is to identify the subject and verb of this sentence.*

What is a fragment?

A sentence *fragment* occurs when a portion (or fragment) of a sentence is treated like a whole, complete sentence. For a group of words to be a complete sentence, it must have an independent clause with a subject and a verb. A fragment may be missing a subject, verb, or both. Also, a fragment does not make sense on its own.

Fragment Examples

- Going to the store.
- After I ate the entire cake.
- Ran the race.

Testing for Sentence Completeness

When you proofread your writing, look for patterns of errors that may develop in your writing. If you find (or already know) you have trouble with fragments, you can use the three steps below to help identify what is causing the fragment(s):

Step One: Is there a subject?

A subject is noun (person, place, or thing) that works with the verb. *If there is NO subject in your sentence, then you have a fragment.*

- **Example of this type of error:** *Raced to reach the whales.*

Step Two: Is there a verb?

Be sure you can identify the variety of verb types like static verbs and active verbs. Static verbs are the different forms of the "to be" verb. Active verbs are the verbs that we often call action words. *If there is NO verb in your sentence, then you have a fragment.*

- **Example of this type of error:** Thousands of whales in the Arctic Ocean because of an early winter.

Step Three: Does the word group include a subordinating Word AND lack an independent clause?

When you have a subordinating word, you are creating a subordinate (or dependent) clause or phrase. Dependent clauses and phrases must be attached to at least one independent clause. *If you have a subordinate clause or phrase that is not attached to an independent clause, you have a fragment.*

- **Example of this type of error:** Because the ship intended to cut a path through the ice.

Activity: Practice Correcting Fragments!

Suggestion: While you are becoming familiar with sentence structures, you might want to underline your subjects and verbs so that you can recognize your independent and dependent clauses more readily.

1. Is there a subject?

First you need to be able to identify a noun, which is a person, place, thing, or idea. The subject is the noun, noun phrase, or pronoun in a sentence that denotes the doer of the action or the person/thing in a state of being. If there is no subject in your sentence, then you have a fragment.

Fragment: Studied hard for class. (Who studied?)

Revise: _____

Fragment: Contained some difficult questions. (What contained?)

Revise: _____

Sentence fragments without a subject often occur when the missing subject is the same as the subject in the previous sentence.

Fragment: The students formed a study group to prepare for the midterm exam. Decided to study.
together for the rest of the course

Revise: _____

Note: Imperative statements (commands and some requests) are an exception. They are NOT sentence fragments. Imperative statements imply the subject "You."

Examples:

- Run! = (You) run!
- Study hard. = (You) study hard.
- Please return my books. = (You) please return my books.

2. Is there a verb?

A verb is the part of speech that shows state of being, action, or occurrence. If there is no verb in your sentence, then you have a fragment.

Examples:

- Yesterday, the telephone rang for hours.
- The man with the muscular legs runs five miles every day.
- She is the most beautiful baby.

Fragment: Yesterday, the students registering for class.

Revise: _____

Fragment: The students talking about an excellent professor who teaches Chemical Engineering.

Revise: _____

Fragment: The telephone with the answering machine

Revise: _____

3. Is there a subordinating word creating a dependent clause?

(If the answer is "yes," is the dependent clause connected to an independent clause?)

Subordinating words attached to a clause always make that clause dependent; therefore, you must attach the dependent clause to an independent clause. If you treat a dependent clause by itself as a complete sentence, then you will have created a fragment. This is commonly one of the trouble spots for fragments.

In general, fragments tend to occur when writing more than one sentence: they occur as ideas are being put together. So it is important to always ask yourself what relationship should be between your ideas and then go on to make sure the connections are correctly punctuated.

One type of subordinating word is a *subordinating conjunction*. A subordinating conjunction comes at the beginning of a dependent clause. Here are some of the most frequently used subordinating conjunctions: *after, although, as, because, before, if, since, unless, until, when, whenever, where*.

Fragment: Because she returned my books.

Revise: _____

Another type of subordinating word is the *relative pronoun*. Relative pronouns create subordinated clauses called adjective clauses and noun clauses. The relative pronouns are *that, what, which, who, whoever, whom, whomever, whose*.