

Sentence Fragments

To understand sentence fragments, we must first know the definition of a complete sentence.

Complete Sentences

Subjects

A sentence must have a *subject*. The subject, or character of the sentence, is commonly a noun that is near the beginning of the sentence, and it performs the action of the verb.

Shallow-bottomed *boats* easily navigate the dangerous coral reefs of the Caribbean.

That strange *man* is a CEO of a Fortune 500 company.

The subject can also be a *gerund phrase*, an {-ing} verb acting as a noun.

Driving could be considered an American pastime.

Predicates

A sentence must also have a *main verb*. The main verb constitutes the central action in the sentence. There may be many verbs in a sentence, but only one is considered a main verb.

The vase *shattered* into a thousand pieces.

The house *crumbled* because the contractor built a poor foundation.

Gerunds ({-ing} verbs that act as nouns), participles ({-ing} and {-ed} verbs that act as adjectives), and infinitives (verbs that begin with “to”) cannot be used as the main verb in a sentence.

He, being [participle] part of the middle class, could not *imagine* how difficult it is to survive [infinitive] on minimum-wage earnings [gerund].

Predicates that are contained within dependent clauses cannot be used as the main verb in a sentence. Subordinating conjunctions (e.g., if, since, because, though) and relative pronouns (e.g., who, which, that) will often signal that a clause is dependent, rather than independent.

Before [subordinating conjunction] the circus came to town, my life *was* little more than a bore.

The dean, who [relative pronoun] was appointed a year earlier, immediately *implemented* sweeping reforms.

Common Errors

The following are common errors that create sentence fragments. Strategies are also provided for identifying and correcting each type of error.

- I. The sentence is missing either a *subject* or *predicate*.
 1. The broken oil lamp.
 2. Went to the community center.

✓ Identify which part of the sentence is missing and insert an appropriate verb or noun.

 1. The oil lamp *was broken*.
 2. *Mr. Davers* went to the community center.
- II. A *gerund*, *participle*, or *infinitive* is acting as the main verb.
 1. One method, known as breaking the bank.
 2. Jessie Owens, competing in the 1936 Summer Olympics.
 3. To get a good grade on the next assignment.

✓ Insert a main verb, or convert the *verbal* to a main verb.

 1. There *is* one method, known as breaking the bank.
 2. Jessie Owens *competed* in the 1936 Summer Olympics.
 3. I *will get* a good grade on the next assignment.
- III. The sentence contains one or more *dependent clauses*, but no *independent clause*.
 1. When I moved to my current residence.
 2. The referee, who had a very sharp eye.

✓ Insert an *independent clause*, or convert the *dependent clause* to an independent one by omitting the *subordinating conjunction*.

 1. I moved to my current residence.
 2. The referee, who had a very sharp eye, made the right call during the game last night.
- IV. A *subordinating conjunction*, which is used to create a *dependent clause*, is instead being used to show linkages between sentences.
 1. Because there are few standards regulating the trading of energy futures.
 2. Though he doesn't know how to operate that piece of machinery.

✓ Use a *conjunctive adverb* (e.g. however, therefore, also) to link two separate sentences.

 1. *Therefore*, there are few standards regulating the trading of energy futures.
 2. *However*, he doesn't know how to operate that piece of machinery.

Activity

Identify the subject and main verb of each sentence. Determine whether one or the other is missing and provide your own correction. Note that for some sentences you will need to supply your own information to complete the sentence.

1. Though e-waste is a major contributor to the pollution of groundwater.
2. The airline pilot, realizing that there was not enough fuel to reach JFK International Airport.
3. Deciding whether or not to buy a new car, which would put me in debt for another ten years.
4. A puppy being a huge responsibility.
5. After the latest storm ravaged the metropolitan area.

Answer Key for Activity

1. However, e-waste is a major contributor to the pollution of groundwater.
2. The airline pilot realized that there was not enough fuel to reach JFK International Airport.
3. I must decide whether or not to buy a new car, which would put me in debt for another ten years.
4. A puppy is a huge responsibility.
5. After the latest storm ravaged the metropolitan area, downtown required a huge clean-up effort.