

Sentence Fragments

Although often used to great effect in creative writing, sentence fragments are considered **unacceptable in academic writing**. For this reason, you will want to revise your writing to ensure that you have eliminated any sentence fragments, and to identify potential sentence fragments, simply remember that complete sentences require **three components: a subject, a predicate, and a complete thought**. You can determine if your sentences are fragments using three questions:

Who or
What +
Verb?

What is the
Subject
Doing?

Is there a
Complete
Thought?

The Subject

The subject of any sentence is the noun that performs the verb, and so the easiest way of identifying the subject is to ask “**Who**” or “**What**” of the verb.

Ex. The photographer took a picture of the defendant as he left the court.



Who took a picture? The photographer performed the action of taking a picture, so “the photographer” is the subject of this sentence.

Note: Passive voice constructions can complicate this simple exercise by removing the subject from the sentence.

Ex. A picture of the defendant was taken as he left the court. ← by the photographer.

Who took a picture? In this case, the sentence does not provide an explicit subject, but the passive voice syntax implies an actor, so this is still a complete sentence.

The Predicate

“Predicate” is a term encapsulating the **verb in the sentence**, as well as object nouns, modifiers, or anything else governed by the verb. To identify the predicate in a sentence, **ask what the subject is doing**.

Ex. To protect the wetlands, the conservationists erected vehicle barriers at all trailheads.



What are the conservationists doing? They are erecting vehicle barriers, and so the phrase “erected vehicle barriers” is the predicate.

Note: The predicate can comprise both **transitive and intransitive verbs**, and so some full sentences can be very short.

Ex. I laughed.

Intransitive Verbs = no object

Exs. walk, speak, fall, sleep

Transitive Verbs = takes object

Exs. ride, move, make, collect

In the above sentence, the verb “laughed” does not take an object noun because it is **intransitive**. By comparison, the verb “took” from the Example 1 above is an example of a **transitive verb**, which **must be accompanied by an object noun**. A transitive verb without an object is a sentence fragment.



Ex. I took.

The immediate question in this case would be “Took what?” So the use of a transitive verb without an attached object noun means that the sentence **lacks necessary information**. This brings us to the final component of a full sentence.

The Complete Thought

The most common type of sentence fragment in most students’ writing has both a subject and predicate, but it also begins with a **subordinating conjunction**. This kind of conjunction creates **dependent clauses**, or clauses that depend on other, complete, clauses for meaning. Consider the following example:

Ex. Because the supervisor failed to collect the students’ permission forms.



The above example suggests some result to this supervisor’s failure “to collect the permission forms”, but we do not learn what that result might be in this sentence. This fragment must be connected to an independent clause that provides the result.

Independent Clause + Result...combined with...Dependent Clause + Action = Complete Thought

Ex. The field trip was cancelled because the supervisor failed to collect the students’ permission forms.

Note: Despite what you may have been told in high school, you can begin this sentence with “because”.

Ex. Because the supervisor failed to collect the students’ permission forms, the field trip was cancelled.