

# 4

---

## *Sentences*

---

### STYLE AND THE SENTENCE

A sentence is a group of words with a period, exclamation point, or question mark at the end. But no definition of the sentence is likely to help us much in writing one. Sentences — the spoken kind — happened first; grammarians named them later. We learn sentence structure by speaking and listening, by reading and writing, more than by studying types of sentences. Still, after studying sentences we can listen more carefully, read more closely, speak more eloquently, and write more clearly. We can learn to *control* the style of our sentences to express feelings and ideas — to make contact with our reader and to hold our reader's interest. We can learn to make sentences that hang together, cohering part with part, achieving unity in the service of clarity. We can learn as well to *vary* our sentences.

### PARTS OF SENTENCES

Before we go into the types of sentences, we need to know something about the parts of sentences and the names of those parts.

Sentences have two main parts, subjects and predicates. The *subject* is what we make a statement or ask a question about. Usually the

subject is a noun, or a pronoun like "she" or "who"; but on occasion the subject can be something else that substitutes for a noun, like a clause or a phrase. (Even a verb can be a subject: "Is is a verb. *Is* is the subject of these sentences.") In the following sentences, the subjects are in italics:

The *frogman* dove.  
The *theory* was valid.  
*Who* committed this brutal crime?  
*Whoever committed this crime* must be insane.

In this sentence the *simple subject* is "woman," and the *complete subject* is "the woman in the blue house by the river":

The woman in the blue house by the river wrote bizarre sentences on the walls.

The *predicate* is the verb along with its modifiers and complements. The predicate is what the sentence says about the subject; most often, the predicate is the action that goes on in the sentence. In these sentences, the simple predicates are in italics:

The frogman *dove*.  
The theory *was* valid.  
*Who* committed this brutal crime?

The *simple predicate* in the next sentence is "wrote"; the *complete predicate* is "wrote on the walls with invisible liquids."

The woman in the blue house wrote on the walls with invisible liquids.

*Objects* come in four forms: direct objects, indirect objects, objects of prepositions, and complementary objects.

The *direct object* is the part of a sentence that the predicate acts upon. Here, the direct objects are in italics.

She designed the *atomic reactor*.  
The president washed the *dishes*.  
*What* did the elephant say?  
Underline the *predicates*.

An *indirect object* usually comes before a direct object, and tells us to whom or for whom (or to what or for what) the predicate acts.

She gave the *team* a case of beer.  
Sam wrote *her* a new song.

Most of the time, the indirect object replaces a prepositional phrase using "to" or "for."

She gave a case of beer *to the team*.  
Sam wrote a new song *for her*.

In the last two sentences "team" and "her" are *objects of prepositions*, nouns or noun substitutes that a preposition relates to another word or word group. Here are more prepositions followed by objects.

When you are defenestrated you are thrown *out a window*.  
Dick the Bruiser was barred *from the premises*.

Another construction has two objects, in which the second modifies or describes the first. The second, or *complementary object*, may be a noun or an adjective. In these examples the complementary object is in italics.

They made her *bartender*.  
He called her a *humbug*.  
Margaret painted the tree *purple*.

*Complements* follow linking verbs like "is" and "become" and "appear." When they modify or describe the sentence's subject, we call these words *subjective complements*. These words can be adjectives or nouns.

She's an *artist*.  
They appeared *pretty*.

A *phrase* is a group of words which work together as a unit, but which lack a subject and a predicate. There are several kinds of phrases, defined by the word introducing it:

Prepositional phrase	The bat <i>in the attic</i> is not a vampire.
Verbal phrase	More and more people <i>will be buying</i> subcompact cars as gasoline prices rise.
Infinitive phrase	Hockey fans tend <i>to enjoy violence</i> .
Gerund phrase	<i>Establishing a fascist state</i> requires ruthlessness and ambition.
Participle phrase	<i>Doubting the medical assumptions of his time</i> , Pasteur sought further knowledge about what causes disease.

A *clause* is a group of words that contains a subject and a predicate. A

clause may be *main* (also called independent) or *subordinate* (also called dependent). A *main clause* can be a simple sentence in itself.

*The thin dog barked.*

A *subordinate clause* is not a complete sentence and cannot stand by itself; rather, it works as a noun, as an adjective, or as an adverb within a sentence.

Noun clause	<i>Whether the new league will flourish</i> is a question that no one can answer with certainty.
Adjective clause	The cricket, <i>which appeared to be wearing a tiny tuxedo</i> , did not answer his naive questions.
Adverb clause	She ordered the troops to attack <i>when it became apparent that to delay any longer would be suicidal</i> .

Each of these last two clauses is a *modifier*. A *modifier* is any word, phrase, or clause that functions as an adjective or adverb.

The bat *in the attic* is not a vampire.

Here the prepositional phrase "in the attic" does something to, *modifies*, "bat"; it tells us *which* bat. If we say, "the vampire bat is in the attic," then the word "vampire" is an adjective that modifies "bat."

The vampire flew slowly around the room when he assumed the form of a bat.

Here we have three modifiers, all acting as adverbs. One modifier tells us about the way the vampire flew: the single word "slowly"; then a prepositional phrase tells us where: the vampire flew "around the room"; then a subordinate clause tells us when it happened: "when he assumed the form of a bat." Manner, place, and time.

Now that we have the names of parts, we can examine types of sentences.

## TYPES OF SENTENCES

### Simple Sentences

A sentence is "simple" as long as it remains one clause, containing one predicate. "John laughed" is a complete, two-word sentence, simple and common in its structure: subject / verb. We could add

modifiers, "Big John laughed loudly," or a preposition, "John laughed at her," and the sentence would remain simple.

A sentence can be quite long and yet still be simple. This sentence is simple, but elaborates the predicate with prepositional phrases:

*Neal runs / with his wife / at Waterman Gymnasium / before classes.*

We can add as many modifiers as we wish; the sentence will remain simple unless we add a subordinate clause.

A subject can be long, too.

*The ape-man in the gray loincloth, a wooden spear in his hand, attacked.*

Either subject or predicate can be compounded, and the sentence remain simple.

*John and his zebra* cried.  
John *laughed and* cried.

Or the verb can be elaborated.

The ape-man *attacked swiftly, with a sharp cry, from behind the rocks.*

Or we can have a direct object, and the object can be elaborated.

The ape-man attacked *the sluggish warriors, those intruders tired from their lengthy searching.*

Or the simple sentence can have all its parts elaborated and remain simple.

The ape-man in the gray loincloth, a wooden spear in his hand, attacked the sluggish warriors swiftly from behind the rocks, the boulders shining in the hot sun.

The basic sentence is still "The ape-man attacked," though by this time we have more definition for each of the parts, more information, and too many adjectives.

### Compound Sentences

A compound sentence has two or more main clauses, each containing a subject and a predicate, each describing an action complete in itself. The clauses in the compound sentence are joined by a connect-

tive — “and,” “but,” “or,” “nor,” “yet,” “for,” or “so” — or by a semicolon or colon.

The economy stagnates and prices rise.

We can lower the price of admission or we can stage fewer plays.

He never went to the snake house again; he had been revolted by the alligator.

The clauses in each of these sentences are independent. Each sentence could become two sentences, with a minimal change of meaning.

The economy stagnates. Prices rise.

We can lower the price of admission. We can stage fewer plays.

He never went to the snake house again. He had been revolted by the alligator.

In the compound sentence, notice that the two complete clauses are nearly equal in importance, or *coordinate*. A compound sentence, of course, can have more than two parts.

Seaver pitched a curve, the runner on first sprinted toward second, and Morgan ran to cover the base.

But a string of coordinate clauses is usually boring.

There was more crime in the street, the criminals were running around free, the judges were letting people go, nobody was safe in the streets, criminals were out on bail, murderers were on parole, and nobody did anything.

### Complex Sentences

If, however, one part of the sentence depends on the other — if the one is the cause of the other, for instance — we have a complex rather than a compound sentence. We call the clause that depends upon the other for explanation or completion, the *subordinate clause*. A complex sentence would be,

*Because the economy stagnates, high prices find few buyers.*

The first clause in this sentence is subordinate.

We can vary sentences even when we use only simple clauses and compounds of equally complete clauses. But the complex sentence provides further variety, and allows us additional conciseness and pre-

cision. Clauses introduced by relative pronouns, “that,” “which,” or “who” — sometimes called *relative clauses* — are subordinate to a main clause; they depend on it.

Do you remember the face of the man *who sold you this ticket!*

The king executed the horse *that had thrown him.*

In other sentences, we attribute cause or sequence, and we do it by a conjunction like “because” or “after.”

*Because the Girl Scouts had proved to be unscrupulous, the neighbors burned the cookies they had purchased.*

*After the movie ended, everyone in the audience left.*

Many other conjunctions — like “although,” “after,” “if,” “since,” and “when” — can introduce subordinate clauses, each with its own precise meaning to be used by the careful writer.

### Compound-Complex Sentences

Frequently, we combine compound and complex sentences, using at least two main clauses and one subordinate clause.

The young heiress jumped under the covers *when her uncle walked in wearing his gorilla suit*, and she refused to come out.

*If you had only proofread the article more carefully*, Mr. Crumbly would not have been so insulted, and we wouldn't have this lawsuit on our hands!

In each sentence the clause in italics is subordinate; the main clauses are in roman type.

### Incomplete Sentences

Another type of sentence commonly used is the incomplete sentence, or fragment. It is incomplete because it lacks a subject or a predicate. “John laughed” is a brief complete sentence. Neither “John” nor “laughed” would be complete by itself, but we could use either of them alone in the proper context.

She thought about whom she might ask to the picnic. Harry? Harry was too grubby. John? John.

When she saw him she covered her mouth and, though she tried to suppress it, laughed. Laughed. He could not believe it.

But the more common incomplete sentence is a phrase or a clause of several words.

The essay by Ellsberg shows great control of sentence variation. Like the variety in the first paragraph.

The incomplete sentence is informal. In more formal prose, other ways could have been found to work "like the variety in the first paragraph" into a long sentence. We use the incomplete sentence also with many common phrases like "No comment," "Not at all," and "Of course."

Although the incomplete sentence occurs frequently in good informal prose, the beginning writer should avoid using sentence fragments entirely, until he has learned to control the varieties of sentences.

Student writers usually make sentence fragments accidentally, without noticing that their sentence lacks a main verb. Often it is the most ambitious sentence that wanders off into incoherence. Here is a vagrant sentence from a theme.

As a result of American military incursion into Indo-China, which was begun in a gradual and secretive way just beyond the bounds of public awareness, and which was modeled on the French attempts that had failed consistently, with heads of state of any interested foreign countries bribed and enormous amounts of economic and military aid being given to the pseudo-leaders, and the American politicians continuing to conceal the true purposes and the true nature of our interests.

By the time this student came to the fifth clause of this huge sentence fragment, he had forgotten the place he started from. The sentence confuses us, and remains incomplete. What *did* happen "as a result of the American military incursion into Indo-China"? Proofreading and patient revision could have prevented this problem. A good solution here would be to rewrite the sentence fragment as two or three shorter, complete sentences. The first rule is clarity.

Another possible danger in incomplete sentences is that they tend to avoid committing themselves. If we take notes on a history lecture, using fragments rather than sentences, we may look at them a month later and read something like, "Too many wars. Bad economy." Unless we remember the context, these phrases may leave us puzzled. They could imply that the number of wars, at some time in history, destroyed a nation's economy. Or they could imply that bad economy

created the wars. Or both. With neither a verb nor the expected order of subject and object to complete the action, the meaning is left vague. Of course it is ambiguity — not having to make up our mind — which appeals to the part of our mind that likes to absolve itself from responsibility.

The recession put everybody out of work in Flint. All those rich people in Cadillacs driving past the homes of the unemployed.

Here the sentence fragment avoids responsibility for making connections, and leaves the meaning unclear; an incomplete sentence leaves the thought illogical. Are the rich people responsible for the unemployment? Should the rich people take detours to avoid the workers' parts of town?

We must remember, at the same time, that a writer *can* use the sentence fragment, *when he knows what he is doing*. If the prose is informal enough, the sentence fragment is yet another possible variation in rhythm and structure. It isolates a fragment in time, because the period creates a pause longer than the pause inserted by a comma or a semicolon.

We were going to be consumed by fire once more, and once more the world would let it happen. As usual. What was true yesterday will be true tomorrow.

Elie Wiesel, *A Beggar in Jerusalem*

Only be careful to use incomplete sentences in an informal context, and deliberately, like Elie Wiesel, to establish pause and emphasis. A careless writer may make clauses into sentences (with periods and capital letters) without purpose, and with choppy results.

He was a writer. Which is a difficult profession. She looked tall. Although she was really only 5'3".

Avoid slack, incoherent sentences like these. These sentences need to become complex, with commas replacing periods.