

Sentences

There are two main components of a sentence: the subject and the verb. The subject is the element that performs the action, and the verb is the action being performed. Here is an example:

Roger ate.

Here the subject (Roger) performed an action (ate). We can also add additional information to the sentence:

Roger ate ice cream.

Here we add the thing that the subject performed the action onto, the object. We can also add more information to explain when, where, how, etc.:

Last Wednesday, on the back porch, Roger ate ice cream.

Notice that we can add the additional information before or after the subject and verb. We can also add information in between the subject and the verb:

Last Wednesday, on the back porch, Roger slowly ate ice cream.

The additional information in a sentence can be brief or lengthy, but it always serves to simply provide more details regarding the subject or the verb.

Exercise

Identify the subject and verb of each of the following sentences:

1. Sue asked a good question.
2. The dog barked all night.
3. Tomorrow we will go to the baseball game.
4. She went to Las Cruces for the weekend.
5. Everyone needs to be more serious about this problem.
6. Joe walked and Anne drove.
7. My brother slept in, but everyone else woke up early.
8. The doctor told me that I need to exercise more.
9. I wonder when the train will arrive in Chicago.
10. If you study, you will do well on this test.
11. When I got to the library I remembered that I had left my laptop at home.
12. The book was interesting, but I did not understand how it related to the movie.

Clauses

The key to understanding how sentences work is to understand clauses. A clause is a simple thing: a subject and a verb. A clause is the core of a sentence. So, in our example below, the clause is in bold:

Last Wednesday, on the back porch, **Roger slowly ate** ice cream with a spoon.

But there are two kinds of clauses: independent and dependent. An independent clause can stand on its own and communicate a thought. This clause is independent:

Roger ate ice cream.

A dependent clause is preceded by a word that makes it incomplete, a word like *because*, *if*, or *although*. Here is a sentence with an independent clause and a dependent clause:

Roger ate ice cream *while* **Sally watched** TV.

The word *while* makes the clause *Sally watched* dependent—it does not communicate a complete thought. Instead, that clause simply gives background information on the action of the independent clause. Dependent clauses cannot grammatically stand alone, and a solitary dependent clause is an incomplete sentence:

When I get home from work.

This incomplete sentence never gives the action of what will happen; it's all background and no event.

Exercise

Identify the dependent and independent clauses in the following sentences:

1. The cat ran away from the dog.
2. I passed the class because I worked with a tutor.
3. When he woke up, he realized that he was late for work.
4. The day was supposed to be warm, but I decided to wear a jacket.
5. Unless you were gone yesterday, you must have heard the news about Judy.
6. If you forget your book, you can borrow mine, but I will need it back after class.
7. I never understood why people cared so much about how much they paid for gas until I started commuting an hour each way for work.

Incomplete Sentences

An incomplete sentence does not have an independent clause. There are two types of incomplete sentences, those with no clause and those with only dependent clauses.

Examples:

My neighbor, the junior-middleweight boxing champion.

When the sun finally went down at the end of the long day.

The first sentence does not have a verb and therefore does not have a clause of any type. The second sentence has a clause, but it is dependent and therefore unable to carry the sentence to completion.

A sentence can be incomplete even if it has several of the pieces of a sentence; if there is no independent clause the sentence is incomplete.

Example:

The man, who had never before in his life been to the beach, but who was eager to try surfing.

There are two dependent clauses and a subject, but there is no verb to complete that clause, so the sentence is incomplete.

The key to identifying incomplete sentences is to identify subjects and verbs and then look for how those clauses operate.

Fused Sentences

A fused sentence occurs when independent clauses are joined incorrectly, resulting in a sentence that feels as if it “runs on.” To understand fused sentences, begin with the ways to effectively connect independent clauses:

1. Use a coordinating conjunction (FANBOY): The dog barked **and** the cat ran away.
2. Use a semi-colon: The dog barked; the cat ran away.

So a fused sentence occurs when neither of these methods is used.

Example:

My car wouldn't start I called a tow truck.

There are four possible revisions for a fused sentence:

1. Split the sentence into two sentences:
My car wouldn't start. I called a tow truck.
2. Place a semi-colon between the two clauses:
My car wouldn't start; I called a tow truck.
3. Use a coordinating conjunction to connect the independent clauses:
My car wouldn't start, so I called a tow truck.
4. Use subordination to make one of the clauses dependent:
Because my car wouldn't start, I called a tow truck.