

## Unit One

### Building Strong Sentences: The Basics of Complete Sentences

Many people feel that writing grammatically correct sentences is a kind of mystery. They feel unsure how to recognize a complete sentence and how to avoid writing sentence fragments. They may feel confused about commas or about punctuation in general. The temptation, as a result, is to treat good writing as a set of arcane, punitive rules – an unknowable set of principles that are just around the corner, out to get you.

Rather than focusing on how to avoid *bad* sentences, it is more helpful to focus on how to write *good* sentences. Better yet, it makes sense to think about *strong* sentences – sentences that *do* something, make strong claims, and have a command over the grammatical building blocks necessary to make those claims persuasively.

These building blocks can be learned. The trick is to remember some basic principles of sentence writing, to practice them, and then to build toward more sophisticated sentences. Avoid seeing these principles as mysteries. See them as a basic framework for expressing your most interesting thoughts and ideas.

#### 1. Complete Sentences

A complete sentence must have a subject and a verb:

Jane laughed.  
[subject] [verb]

I thought long and hard about the matter.  
[subject] [verb]

It can have other things too, but it needs an identifiable subject doing a complete action:

Jane laughed at the clown in the circus while eating a hot dog.  
[subject] [verb]

When I got home from the appointment, I thought long and hard about the matter of my health.  
[subject] [verb]

#### 2. Sentence Fragments

A sentence without an identifiable subject and verb is an incomplete sentence, or **sentence fragment**.

Will do.  
[verb – no subject. Who will do? “That”? “He”?]

The one with the brown coat.  
[subject – no verb. What about the “one”? What is “the one with the brown coat” doing?]

This idea at the heart of the article.  
[subject – no verb. What about “this idea”?]

There are some common reasons that people write sentence fragments. Again, it’s not a mystery! The usual reason is that they have separated out as a fragment of a larger, complete sentence.

Although he came home. – *Sentence Fragment (Dependent Clause)*

**A “dependent clause” relies on an already complete sentence to make sense. Here’s a complete sentence using the above fragment:**

Although he came home, he went back out.  
[subject] [verb]

“He went back out” is a complete sentence. It can stand on its own. “Although he came home” is an unfinished thought without it.

We will go over sentences with *dependent clauses* in subsequent handouts. For now, remember that sentences that begin with words like *Although, While, Because, Unless, Since, After, When, If, and Even though* will produce sentence fragments unless they are attached to a complete action. Examples:

While I was outside. – *Sentence Fragment*

While I was outside, I mowed the lawn. - *Complete Sentence*

Even though the sign said “Stop.” - *Sentence Fragment*

He went anyway, even though the sign said “Stop.” - *Complete Sentence*

Another common source of incomplete sentences is “garbled sentences,” or sentences that have missing or jumbled words. These you should be able to avoid with proof-reading.

I the article is wrong – *Garbled (missing verb, e.g., “I think...”)*

Berry’s claims that would not work. – *Garbled (the writer confuses a statement about “Berry’s claims” with a sentence about what “Berry claims...”)*

### 3. Compound Sentences

Once you know how to write complete sentences, you can start building longer sentences, such as **compound sentences**.

A compound sentence joins two complete sentences together with a comma plus the words *and, but, yet, so, for, or nor*. The latter are called “coordinating words,” or connecting words.

Jane laughed, and I cried.  
[subject] [verb] [subject] [verb]

Jane laughed at the movie while we waited, but I cried from hunger.  
[subject] [verb] [subject] [verb]

A compound sentence *must* have a complete clause – with subject and verb - on both sides of the comma.

Jane laughed, and cried.  
[subject] [verb] [verb]

**Here, Jane is doing both the laughing and crying. Either add a subject to the second clause (e.g., “she cried”) or drop the comma (e.g., “Jane laughed and cried.”)**

Why write compound sentences at all? Compound sentences are a step toward stronger sentences because they convey a *relationship* between two ideas or statements. Note how “but” conveys a very different relationship than “and.”

Jane laughed, and I cried. – *The two events happened together.*

Jane laughed, but I cried. – *The writer means to draw attention to the disconnect between these two events.*

Berry argues that we need to think about the role of education in our sense of “place,” and he gives a minimal definition of what he means by education. – *The writer is listing what Berry says in his article.*

Berry argues that we need to think about the role of education in our sense of “place,” but he gives only a minimal definition of what he means by education. - *The writer is turning the screws on Berry. The “but” conveys that Berry’s minimal definition is a problem.*

#### 4. Comma Splices

One of the most common errors of student writing is comma splices – two parts of a compound sentence “spliced” together with a comma and no coordinating word (*and, yet, but, so, for...*).

Jane laughed, I cried. – *Comma Splice*

I went to the store, I bought a watermelon. – *Comma Splice*

Derrick Rose is the best basketball player, he plays to win. – *Comma Splice*

These comma splices are run-on sentences. They have multiple complete thoughts, or clauses, tacked together without appropriate stops or connecting words.

To fix a comma splice, you can (a) add a connecting word, or (b) add a period or harder punctuation, like a semi-colon.

Jane laughed, but I cried. *Or*

Jane laughed. I cried. *Or*

Jane laughed; I cried.

I went to the store, where I bought a watermelon. *Or*

I went to the store. I bought a watermelon.

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#### Practice Exercises

(a) Practice editing the passage below. Write the name of the problem over the incorrect elements: “sentence fragment” or “incomplete sentence”; “garbled sentence”; and “comma splice.” Then re-write the passage correctly.

He that Obama was wrong to invade Libya. Military intervention was not necessary, it did no good for the American people. Will probably even end badly, too. We should never invade another country and we should never join other countries in doing so. Even though we have the power to do it.

(b) Write the longest, most fascinating complete compound sentence you can. Avoid run-ons and comma splices. Show a relationship between two ideas in your choice of coordinating word.