



## Grammar: Sentence Fragments (Dependent Phrases and Clauses)

### What is a Sentence Fragment?

- A sentence fragment is a sequence of words or a phrase that does not make a complete sentence.
- It is missing all or some of the **necessary pieces** that make up a complete sentence.
- Example
  - **At the house.**

**Speaking and Writing Center [1]:** These necessary pieces include a subject and a verb.

**Speaking and Writing Center [2]:** This fragment is just made up of a preposition and a noun. It does not give enough information on its own for the reader to understand the purpose of the sentence. An added subject and verb will make this fragment into a complete sentence by providing the necessary context.

### Sentences vs Clauses vs. Phrases

- Phrases and clauses are what make up sentences.
- Phrases generally contain either a subject or a verb, but never contain both and cannot stand on their own as a complete sentence.
  - Examples:
    - Eating after work
    - Driving to the apartment
    - The best professor on campus
- Imperative sentences, however, are complete sentences without a subject. There is no explicit subject because the subject is implied. These are different from phrases or dependent clauses where outside information isn't implied, therefore making the fragments hard to understand.
  - Example:
    - **Go to the store.**

**Speaking and Writing Center [3]:** This is an imperative sentence, which doesn't have a subject. However, when you read this sentence, you can make complete sense of it. That is because the subject is implied; the imperative (or command) form has the intended audience as the subject. If someone said this to you, you would recognize that you are the subject.



- Clauses are one unit of a sentence and contain both a **subject** and a **verb**, but they may or may not be able to stand on their own as a complete sentence. Clauses can be either independent or dependent.
  - Independent Clause Examples:
    - **The girls aced their chemistry final.**
    - **I ate breakfast.**
  - Dependent Clause Examples:
    - **When he walked into his classroom**
    - **Although my friends and I went to bed early**
- Sentences always have a subject and a verb and express a **complete thought**.
  - Examples:
    - **The students were excited for graduation.**
    - **After class ended, they decided to stop by the CRUC.**
- A sentence can be just one clause, or it can be made up of several clauses and/or phrases.

## Independent Clauses

- An independent clause is an example of a proper sentence in that it fits the requirements to be a sentence.
- Example:
  - He studied in the library.

**Speaking and Writing Center [4]:** A subject is what/ who the sentence is describing. Common subjects include people, places, things, and ideas.

**Speaking and Writing Center [5]:** A verb is a word used to describe an action. Some examples include ran, went, say, and have.

**Speaking and Writing Center [6]:** This is an example of an independent clause, which means it could stand on its own as a complete sentence. It has a clear subject ("the girls") and verb ("aced") which tells who did what action.

**Speaking and Writing Center [7]:** This is a complete, standalone thought, which makes it an independent clause. There is no other information necessary to better understand this clause.

**Speaking and Writing Center [8]:** This is an example of a dependent clause. While it contains a clear subject ("he") and verb ("walked"), it does not express a complete thought. The reader needs more information to understand this clause. The reader does not know what happened when the subject walked into his classroom.

**Speaking and Writing Center [9]:** This is another example of a dependent clause. There is a clear subject ("my friends and I") and verb phrase ("went to bed"), but more information is needed to understand the clause, so it does not express a complete thought. The reader does not know what happened despite the subjects going to bed early.

**Speaking and Writing Center [10]:** Something being a complete thought requires the subject and verb and the phrase to express one coherent idea.

**Speaking and Writing Center [11]:** This sentence is made up of a single clause, though it is a complete thought because it includes a subject ("students"), a verb ("were"), and then what they were ("excited").

**Speaking and Writing Center [12]:** This sentence is made up of two separate clauses, separated by the comma. The first clause is dependent and is unable to stand on its own because it doesn't explain what happened after class ended. The second clause is independent and could stand on its own, because it has a subject ("they"), verb ("decided"), and then what they decided to do. You don't need to know when to understand what decision they made.



## Dependent Clauses

- A dependent clause contains a subject and a verb, but is not a sentence.
- Dependent clauses are not complete thoughts because more information is needed to make sense of the clause.
- They can be identified by a **dependent marker word**.
  - Examples include when, after, if, since, even, because, while, although
- Example:
  - **While he studied in the library**

**Speaking and Writing Center [13]:** These can also be called subordinate clauses because they are in service to an independent clause that carries the main idea. Generally, these clauses answer the questions that could be asked about the independent clause like why, when, where, or how. They provide additional information which doesn't make sense on its own.

**Speaking and Writing Center [14]:** A dependent marker word is a word that is used to introduce a dependent clause. It often indicates that the phrase is answering when, where, why, or how. The list below is not every possible dependent marker word.

**Speaking and Writing Center [15]:** Here, while is an dependent marker word which indicates that this phrase is answering the question when. If you were to remove "while" from the front of this clause, it would be an independent clause sentence. You can use this trick to identify other dependent marker words, by seeing if you remove the word the sentence will become a independent clause (though, that doesn't always create a better sentence; it just fixes the grammar issue.).

## How to Recognize a Dependent Clause/Sentence Fragment

- Example of a dependent clause attached to an independent clause:
  - **While he studied at Simpson library, he listened to music.**
- Sentence fragments are dependent clauses not attached to independent clauses. They can be correct in some contexts, such as creative writing or back-and-forth conversations, but in formal writing they are not as appropriate.
- When revising your paper, look at each sentence and check if it is a sentence fragment by asking yourself:
  - Does this make sense on its own? If it does, you're good to go!
- If not, see if you can attach it to a sentence around it to help add context and meaning to that sentence. If you are attaching a dependent clause to the beginning of a sentence, you need a comma. If you are attaching it to the end of a sentence, you do not need a comma.

**Speaking and Writing Center [16]:** Dependent clause signaled by the word "while" which means this clause answers the question when about another part of the sentence. The word while makes it dependent because the information about what happened while he was studying is not in this clause.

**Speaking and Writing Center [17]:** Independent clause. It could stand on its own as its own sentence because it contains a subject, verb, and expresses one coherent idea. "He listened to music" isn't a particularly descriptive sentence, but it does express who (he), what that subject did (listened), and what the object of that action was (music).

## Examples and Revisions

- Example: **I finally decided to go to class today. Although I'd rather have stayed in bed.**
  - **Revision: I finally decided to go to class today although I'd rather have stayed in bed.**
  - **Revision: Although I'd rather have stayed in bed, I finally decided to go to class today.**

**Speaking and Writing Center [18]:** This example needs to be revised because the "although" in the second phrase makes it a dependent clause, and thus it needs to be attached to the independent clause.

**Speaking and Writing Center [19]:** These revisions improved the sentences by connecting the phrases together, which meant the dependent clause was properly attached to the independent clause. As you can see, this could be done by adding the dependent clause either behind or in front of the independent clause.



- Example: Walking down campus walk and jumping in the fountain.
  - Revision: We walked down campus walk and jumped in the fountain.
  - Revision: I couldn't have been happier walking down campus walk and jumping in the fountain.

**Speaking and Writing Center [20]:** This phrase does not have a subject since no one is doing the walking or jumping, making it not a proper sentence.

**Speaking and Writing Center [21]:** For this revision, we improved the sentence by both adding a subject and changing the verbs from progressive ("walking" and "jumping") to the past tense to express the sentence more simply. However, if you wanted to keep the progressive tense (to show it is what you are in the process of doing), you could write, "We are walking down campus walk and jumping in the fountain."

## Fragments for Emphasis

- It isn't always wrong to use a sentence fragment; sometimes, they can be used intentionally for emphasis.
- Sentence fragments can be used for a variety of purposes:
  - To make dialogue sound more natural
  - To emulate realistic speech patterns
  - To convey disjointedness
  - To increase pacing
  - To emphasize an image or a point
- Check out this example from Erin Morgenstern's *The Starless Sea*:
  - "There is a stag in the snow. Blink and he will vanish. . . . The stag is a shot left untaken. An opportunity lost. Stolen like a kiss. In these new forgetful times with their changed ways sometimes the stag will pause a moment longer. He waits though once he never waited, would never dream to wait or wait to dream. He waits now. For someone to take the shot. For someone to pierce his heart. To know he is remembered."
- It's usually best to reserve this technique for creative or less-formal writing assignments. It may not always be appropriate for formal academic writing.

**Speaking and Writing Center [22]:** Here we revised by adding an additional clause with a subject (I) and verb, (have been), which serves as the main verb in the sentence. Here, walking and jumping become gerunds-- words that look like -ing verbs but are acting as nouns in the sentence.

**Speaking and Writing Center [23]:** Here, these sentence fragments allow the author to imbue the image of the stag with multiple layers of meaning.

**Speaking and Writing Center [24]:** Here, these sentence fragments work together to create a listing-like effect.