

Sentence Fragments

A sentence fragment is a clause (a group of words) that does not express a complete thought. For example, imagine a friend calls you on the phone and says, "Because I really want to go to the concert." You'd think to yourself, "And ... Go on...."

Because I really want to go to the concert is a dependent clause; it "depends" on additional information to make it a complete sentence.

If, however, your friend had said, "Because I really want to go to the concert, I'm going to stand in line for hours in this awful weather," you would think, "Okay, fine, whatever you want to do." The fragment is now a complete sentence, and you understand what your friend is saying.

In the same way, it's important that you don't break your writing up into fragmented parts that leave your reader confused. The following 4 points will explain how to avoid using sentence fragments in your writing.

POINT 1:

Make sure every sentence has a subject and a verb. (There are two types of verbs: action verbs and linking verbs.)

- **Tony runs four miles every day.**

The verb, *runs* is a regular verb. It tells what kind of action the subject, *Tony*, is doing.

- **This spring seems cooler than last spring.**

Seems is a linking verb. It links the subject, *spring*, with the descriptive word *cooler*.

POINT 2:

Watch out for *-ing* words. No verb ending in *-ing* can ever be the complete verb of a sentence. The following are examples of fragments which contain *-ing* verbs:

- Sitting in my car waiting for the light to change.
- The girl flirting with her boyfriend.
- The woman running down the street after her son.

None of these expresses a complete thought. You can, however, make these into complete sentences by adding either a subject or a verb.

- **I was** sitting in my car waiting for the light to change. (Add a subject: who was sitting?)
- The girl **is** flirting with her boyfriend. (Add a helping verb: *-ing* verbs in an independent clause are okay as long as you have a helping verb in front of them.)
- The woman **was** running down the street. (Add a helping verb)

POINT 3:

A dependent clause is a sentence fragment. (A clause is simply a group of words containing a subject and a verb.) There are two types of clauses:

Independent clause:

1. Has a subject and a verb
2. Is another name for a complete sentence that can stand alone and make sense

Dependent clause:

1. Has a subject and a verb
2. Is another name for a fragment
3. Cannot stand alone

This is an independent clause:

- **I understood the importance of writing clearly.**

But if you put certain words in front of it, it becomes a dependent clause or a fragment:

- **Because** I understood the importance of writing clearly.
- **Before** I understood the importance of writing clearly.
- **When** I understood the importance of writing clearly.

It's okay to use dependent clauses such as these in your writing as long as they are attached to an independent clause.

The following fragments or dependent clauses need independent clauses to make them complete.

- Since I've been going to college.
- While the fans behind the basket cheered wildly.
- Because everyone knew the unspoken rules.
- After I learned he was married.

To make these fragments into complete sentences, join them with independent clauses.

- Since I've been going to college, **I have little time for a social life.**
- **Charles Barkley concentrated on making his free throw** while the fans behind the basket cheered wildly.
- **No one ventured to ask the president a sensible question** because everyone knew the unspoken rules.
- After I learned he was married, **I stopped dating my boyfriend.**

Remember:

- dependent clause alone = fragment
- independent clause added to dependent clause = complete sentence

Every sentence must have at least one independent clause. An independent clause is the main idea, a complete thought. It can be a complete sentence in itself. A dependent clause serves only to give additional information about the main idea of the sentence.

- I plan to get a job in the medical field **after I finish college**.

The main idea is that the speaker plans to get a job in the medical field. The dependent clause merely gives additional information. In this case, it tells when.

Something to keep in mind: Usually in your writing you'll find that sentence fragments occur when you're afraid of using really long sentences.

- **Even though everyone is busy these days, many people are bored with their lives. Stuck in jobs or relationships that provide no meaning or satisfaction.**

Stuck in jobs or relationships that provide no meaning or satisfaction is a fragment because it cannot stand alone as a complete thought. To correct it, you would join it with a comma to the sentence before it:

- **Even though everyone is busy these days, many people are bored with their lives, stuck in jobs or relationships that provide no meaning or satisfaction.**

It's better to have long sentences than to write in fragments.

HOW TO AVOID FRAGMENTS

- **Make sure every sentence has a subject and a verb.**
- **Don't mistake an *-ing* word for the complete verb.**
- **Make sure every sentence has at least one complete thought.**