

Fragments

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/fragments.html>

The basics

Before we get to the problems and how to fix them, let's take a minute to review some information that is so basic you've probably forgotten it.

What is a complete sentence? A complete sentence is not merely a group of words with a capital letter at the beginning and a period or question mark at the end. A complete sentence has three components:

1. a subject (the actor in the sentence)
2. a predicate (the verb or action), and
3. a complete thought (it can stand alone and make sense—it's independent).

Some sentences can be very short, with only two or three words expressing a complete thought, like this:

John waited.

This sentence has a subject (*John*) and a verb (*waited*), and it expresses a complete thought. We can understand the idea completely with just those two words, so again, it's independent—an **independent clause**. But independent clauses (i.e., complete sentences) can be expanded to contain a lot more information, like this:

John waited for the bus all morning.

John waited for the bus all morning in the rain last Tuesday.

Wishing he'd brought his umbrella, John waited for the bus all morning in the rain last Tuesday.

Wishing he'd brought his umbrella and dreaming of his nice warm bed, John waited for the bus all morning in the rain last Tuesday because his car was in the shop.

As your sentences grow more complicated, it gets harder to spot and stay focused on the basic elements of a complete sentence, but if you look carefully at the examples above, you'll see that the main thought is still that *John waited*—one main subject and one main verb. No matter how long or short the other sentence parts are, none of them can stand alone and make sense.

Being able to find the main subject, the main verb, and the complete thought is the first trick to learn for identifying fragments and run-ons.

Sentence fragments

A sentence fragment is an **incomplete sentence**. Some fragments are incomplete because they lack either a subject or a verb, or both. The fragments that most students have trouble with, however, are **dependent clauses**—they have a subject and a verb, so they look like complete sentences, but they don't express a complete thought. They're called "dependent" because they can't stand on their own (just like some people you might know who are SO dependent!). Look at these dependent clauses. They're just begging for more information to make the thoughts complete:

Because his car was in the shop (What did he do?)

After the rain stops (What then?)

When you finally take the test (What will happen?)

Since you asked (Will you get the answer?)

If you want to go with me (What should you do?)

Does each of these examples have a subject? Yes. Does each have a verb? Yes. So what makes the thought incomplete?? It's the first word (*Because, After, When, Since, If*). These words belong to a special class of words called **subordinators** or **subordinating conjunctions**. If you know something about subordinating conjunctions, you can probably eliminate 90% of your fragments.

First, you need to know that subordinating conjunctions do three things:

1. join two sentences together
2. make one of the sentences dependent on the other for a complete thought (make one a dependent clause)
3. indicate a logical relationship

Second, you need to recognize the subordinators when you see them. Here is a list of common subordinating conjunctions and the relationships they indicate:

Cause / Effect: because, since, so that

Comparison / Contrast: although, even though, though, whereas, while

Place & Manner: how, however, where, wherever

Possibility / Conditions: if, whether, unless

Relation: that, which, who

Time: after, as, before, since, when, whenever, while, until

Third, you need to know that the subordinator (and the whole dependent clause) doesn't have to be at the beginning of the sentence. The dependent clause and the independent clause can switch places, but the whole clause moves as one big chunk. Look at how these clauses switched places in the sentence:

Because his car was in the shop, John took the bus.

John took the bus *because his car was in the shop*.

Finally, you need to know that every dependent clause needs to be attached to an independent clause (remember, the independent clause can stand on its own).

How do you find and fix your fragments? Remember the basics: subject, verb, and complete thought. If you can recognize those things, you're halfway there. Then, scan your sentences for subordinating conjunctions. If you find one, first identify the whole chunk of the dependent clause (the subject and verb that go with the subordinator), and then make sure they're attached to an independent clause.

John took the bus. (independent clause) Because his car was in the shop. (Dependent clause all by itself. Uh oh! Fragment!)

John took the bus because his car was in the shop. (Hooray! It's fixed!)