OU Writing Center
The University of Oklahoma

Sentence Fragments

Independent versus dependent clauses

To stand alone, a sentence needs an **independent clause**. This means it needs a *subject*, a *verb*, and a complete thought. A **sentence fragment** is an incomplete sentence. It is missing one of more of these required elements. For example:

> "Running late to class."
>
> > This sentence is missing a *subject*. *Who* is running late to class? To make it an independent clause, we need to answer that question.
>
> "*I am* running late to class."
>
> > This is now a complete sentence. Note that the verb form was updated to the correct conjugation for the first-person singular.

Dependent clauses are clauses that cannot be complete sentences on their own (see our "Types of Clauses" handout for details). Often, these are indicated by *subordinating conjunctions*. These are words like "while, because, when, after," and more. These words *can* indicate an incomplete sentence.

> "*When* she gets home."
>
> > This is a sentence fragment. What happens when she gets home? This sentence doesn't tell us. There are two solutions to this. One option is to remove the subordinating conjunction.
>
> "She gets home."
>
> > Now this is a complete sentence. Alternatively, you could finish the thought by telling us what happens when she gets home.

"When she gets home, *she pets her dog*."

Short Sentences

Just because a sentence is short does not mean it is a sentence fragment. Sentences as short as two words can express a complete thought, a subject, and a verb. For example,

"I walked."

> Who walked? *I* walked. What did I do? I *walked*. You could add more information to the sentence, but you don't need to for it to stand alone.

Additionally, sentences can be one word if that word is a command. This means the subject is implied. "Stop!" "Wait." and "Go!" are all complete sentences. The implied subject is "you," or the person being told to stop, wait, or go.

When is it okay to use sentence fragments?

Sometimes writers choose to use sentence fragments as a stylistic choice. This often occurs in fiction writing. For example,

> Lily was exhausted from her long day. Running between classes. Fighting for parking. Struggling to finish her assignments. She just needed a minute to relax.

Here, there are three sentence fragments. These fragments emphasize how much Lily had to do; each action stands out in its own fragment. In fiction, this is often acceptable. If you're writing for an assignment, check with your instructor to see what they allow.

Additionally, people often use sentence fragments in casual writing, such as in their emails. Closing an email with "Looking forward to it!" is grammatically incorrect, but most people wouldn't think twice about it. It's up to you to decide how formal the situation is and whether sentence fragments are okay or not.

More Examples

Let's go through a few more examples of sentence fragments!

1. "Excited to meet you!"
   This sentence does not tell us *who* is excited to meet you. To fix this, add a *subject*.

   "*My friend* is excited to meet you!"

2. “While it’s still hot outside.”
   This is not a complete sentence because it isn’t a complete thought. What is happening while it’s still hot outside? You can either remove the *subordinating conjunction* “*while*,” or finish the thought.

   “It’s still hot outside.” OR “*I want to go to the water park* while it’s still hot outside.”

3. “Had a good time at the football game.”
   This sentence has no *subject*. *Who* had a good time at the football game?

   “*We* had a good time at the football game.”

4. “My cat with her toy.”
   This sentence is missing a *verb*. What did my cat do with her toy, or what did she and her toy do? Finish this sentence by finishing the thought.

   “My cat *played* with her toy.” OR “*I saw* my cat with her toy in her mouth.”

5. “I wanted to find more people who liked grammar. Like me.”
   Here, the second sentence is a fragment, likely for emphasis. If you want to make sure it’s grammatically correct, combine the sentences. Otherwise, it’s okay to leave it for style.

   “I wanted to find more people who liked grammar, like me.”

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