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Sentences and Sentence Patterns

The English language provides considerable ﬂexibility in sentence con- struction. Using various sentence patterns produces speech and writing that are lively and interesting. Also, variety in sentence construction con- tributes to well-organized messages. (See Chapter 6 for more on sentence patterns.)

This chapter explains the building blocks of sentences—phrases and clauses, subjects and predicates—and the various ways sentences are constructed.

## Sentences, Fragments, and Run-Ons

A *sentence* is a group of words that expresses a complete thought. It begins with a capital letter and closes with an end mark, either a period, a question mark, or an exclamation point. Sentences are classiﬁed as declarative (a statement), interrogative (a question), imperative (command or request), or exclamatory (for emphasis).

**Declarative:** We reached the ﬁnal level of *Doom*.

**Interrogative:** How did you get past the Valley of Fire? **Imperative:** Click on the dragon. Watch out for the Black Guard. **Exclamatory:** I’m in the Secret Chamber!

Not every group of words is a sentence. A *fragment* is a phrase or clause that looks like a sentence but does not express a complete thought.

**Fragment:** down by the river where the ﬁsh bite if he would just think

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By themselves, fragments make little sense and leave important ques- tions unanswered. Who or what is *down by the river where the ﬁsh bite*? What would happen *if he would just think*? Fragments must be joined with other sentence parts to form a complete thought.

**Sentence: We were** down by the river where the ﬁsh bite.

**He could save himself so much trouble** if he would just think.

Unlike fragments, which haven’t enough parts to make a complete sen- tence, *run-ons* have too many parts. They are two or more complete thoughts—at times only vaguely related—strung together without punctuation.

**Run-On:** We have only three days until the trip starts I don’t have my jacket repaired yet and that will take at least a day or so to do don’t you think?

Run-on sentences can be corrected in a number of ways: by inserting the proper punctuation, by breaking the sentence into two or more smaller sentences, or by rewriting the sentence to eliminate the run-on.

**Revised:** We have only three days until the trip starts, and I forgot to have my jacket repaired. Do you think the repairs will take more than a day or so?

We have only three days to get ready for the trip. I forgot to have my jacket repaired. Do you think the repairs will take more than a day or so?

## Phrases and Clauses

The various parts of speech are grouped into phrases and clauses, which make up the basic sentence.

### *Phrases*

*Phrases* are groups of related words that do not contain a subject-verb com- bination or express a complete thought. There are noun, prepositional, par- ticipial, verb, and inﬁnitive phrases.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Noun:** | my widescreen TV | the tired old man |
| **Prepositional:** | over the wall | around the block |
| **Participial:** | playing the fool | running the program |
| **Verb:** | will be given | is coming |
| **Inﬁnitive:** | to think | to draw |

### *Clauses*

*Clauses* are groups of related words that contain a subject-verb combina- tion. *Independent clauses* express a complete thought and can stand by themselves as sentences. *Subordinate clauses* serve as part of a sentence but do not express a complete thought and cannot stand by themselves. They are subordinate to independent clauses.

**Independent clauses:** the ﬂoodplain was completely underwater

John got us jobs as stagehands they took the off-road trail

**Subordinate clauses:** by the time June arrived

because he works at the theater when they came to the turn

**Complete sentences: By the time June arrived**, the ﬂoodplain

was completely underwater.

John got us jobs as stagehands, **because he works at the theater.**

**When they came to the turn**, they took the off-road trail.

## Subject and Predicate

The *subject* is the person, place, or thing that is the topic of the sentence. The *predicate* is what is said about the subject.

**Subject Predicate**

The balloon ﬂoated up through the trees. New York City is a major cultural center.

The zoo worker was attacked by a tiger.

In most cases, as in the preceding examples, the subject of a sentence comes ﬁrst, followed by the predicate. However, there are instances when the subject is placed after the predicate, omitted from the sentence, or placed inside the verb.

Into the valley of death rode **the six hundred**. (subject follows the predicate)

Wash the car by tonight. (subject *you* is understood)

Are **your parents** coming tomorrow? (subject is placed inside the verb)

There are **three ships** coming into the bay. (*There* occupies the place of the subject, but *three ships* is still the subject of the sentence.)

### *Forms of the Subject*

The most common forms of the subject are nouns, pronouns, and proper nouns.

The **stock market** is strong right now.

Why don’t **you** pick up some lettuce for tonight?

**Carol** almost ﬂunked algebra this semester.

At times, noun phrases and clauses, gerunds and gerund phrases, and inﬁnitive phrases can also function as the subject.

**Noun phrase: The girl on the swing** is my niece.

**Noun clause: What they said** isn’t true.

**Gerund: Swimming** is a major Olympic sport.

**Gerund phrase: Playing chess** kept him occupied for hours.

**Inﬁnitive phrase: To see clearly** is an artist’s greatest task.

**Complete Subject.** The noun or pronoun and all its modiﬁers are known as the *complete subject.*

**The ship in the harbor** seemed small and frail.

**What he said in the car** surprised us all.

**The trees, which had been damaged in the storm,** were cut down the next day.

**Simple and Compound Subjects.** The noun or pronoun is known as the *simple subject*. It is important to identify the subject because it controls the form of the verb used in the sentence.

The **ship** in the harbor seemed small and frail.

**Daffodils** open in early spring.

The **trees**, which had been damaged in the storm, were cut down the next day.

The *compound subject* is composed of two or more nouns, pronouns, or phrases or clauses to express the topic of a sentence.

**Nouns:** The **Democrats** and **Republicans** fought a bitter campaign.

**Pronouns: She** and **I** used to be best friends.

**Noun clauses: What he wanted** and **what he got** were two

different things.

###### Gerund phrases: Working at home and commuting

**electronically** are more popular now.

### *Forms of the Predicate*

The predicate always contains a verb. An action verb generally will have an object as well as various verb modiﬁers. A linking verb will have a com- plement along with its verb modiﬁers. Thus, the predicate usually is com- posed of a verb, object or complement, and verb modiﬁers.

**Predicate with Action Verbs.** The most common form of predicate is one in which the verb describes some sort of action. The verb is followed by a direct object (DO) and, in some cases, by an indirect object (IO).

IO DO

Indiana Jones sent his **partner** the secret **code**.

DO DO

I brought four **sandwiches** and one **pizza**.

DO

Michael Phelps won six gold **medals** in the 2004 summer Olympics.

IO DO

She gave **him** a **rose**.

*Note:* the object of a preposition is never an indirect object.

DO O OF PREP

She gave a **rose** to **him**.

Some action verbs can drop their objects and still make sense. The pred- icate then consists of the verb only.

They **have been practicing**. We **were reading**.

The reporter **disappeared.**

The weather **changed**.

Action verbs can also take complements. Nouns, pronouns, preposi- tional phrases, adjectives, and verb phrases can serve as complements in the predicate.

He taught the dog **to roll over**. (The inﬁnitive phrase *to roll over* is the complement.)

I called him a **prince**. (The noun *prince* is the complement.)

They made camp **on the hill**. (The prepositional phrase *on the hill* is the complement.)

She acted her part **beautifully**. (The adverb *beautifully* is the complement.)

We saw the tornado **heading this way**. (The participial phrase

*heading this way* is the complement.)

She lay **down in the tall grass**. (The adverb *down* and the prepositional phrase *in the tall grass* are the complement and indicate direction and location.)

**Predicate with Linking Verbs.** Linking verbs that express being, seem- ing, or becoming need a predicate adjective or verb complement to com- plete them. The more common of these verbs include *seem, become, grow, taste, smell, appear, look, feel,* and *sound*.

He seems **nervous**. (*He seems* is incomplete. The adjective *nervous*

acts as the predicate adjective.)

I feel **that you should apologize for your outburst**. (The noun clause

*that you should apologize for your outburst* is the verb complement.)

**Compound Predicate.** At times a sentence will contain more than one verb, object, or complement. These structures are known as *compound verbs, compound objects,* and *compound complements*.

The rookie **hits** and **ﬁelds** like Ichiro Suzuki. (Two verbs function as the compound verb.)

I gave away my **coat** and **boots.** (The two nouns *coat* and *boots* serve as the compound direct object of the verb *gave*.)

Mark’s ﬁrst week abroad was **long** and **lonely**. (The two adjectives

*long* and *lonely* are the compound complement.)

## Sentence Constructions

English has four basic sentence constructions: simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex. Each construction uses the same basic elements of sentence structure—parts of speech, phrases, and clauses.

### *Simple Sentence*

The *simple sentence* is an independent clause with no subordinate clauses. It begins with a capital letter and closes with an end mark. Simple sen- tences can vary considerably in length.

I bought four apples at the farmers’ market.

I bought four apples, a basket of tomatoes, a bag of green beans, and three squashes at the farmers’ market.

The farmers’ market is a classic example of producers selling directly to consumers and avoiding the attempts of agents to control the supply or to manipulate the price.

### *Compound Sentence*

The *compound sentence* contains two or more independent clauses but no subordinate clauses. The two independent clauses usually are joined by a comma followed by a conjunction (*and, but, nor, yet*). They may also be joined by a semicolon, a semicolon followed by a linking adverb (*therefore, however, because, since*), or a colon.

**Conjunction:** I don’t know where he went, and no one has seen him since this afternoon.

**Semicolon:** Harold the First fought in northern Ireland; his campaigns generally were successful.

**Linking adverb:** Vivian wanted to stay another week in Ashville; however, her parents refused to send her more money.

**Colon:** You must have heard the news: we’re all getting bonuses this year!

### *Complex Sentence*

The *complex sentence* is made up of an independent clause and one or more subordinate clauses. When a subordinate clause introduces the sentence, it is usually followed by a comma unless it is very short. In the following examples, the subordinate clauses are printed in bold type.

The library closes early in summer **when the students are out of school**.

**After the clear days of Indian summer**, the autumn skies grow heavy and dark.

Linda told us on the phone **that they had had a ﬂat tire last night and that the car wouldn’t start this morning.**

**When you come in the front door**, make sure you push it shut,

###### because the lock doesn’t always catch.

*Compound-Complex Sentence*

The *compound-complex sentence* is composed of two or more independent clauses and one or more subordinate clauses. In the examples, the subor- dinate clauses are printed in bold type.

John Lennon wrote many ballads, and he recorded them **while he was in England.**

The letter carrier, **who is always punctual**, didn’t come today; I wonder if she is ill.

He should call you **as soon as he arrives**; but **if you don’t hear from him**, let me know.

### *Modiﬁers in Sentences*

A *modiﬁer* is any word or group of words that limits or qualiﬁes the mean- ing of other parts of the sentence. Be sure that your modiﬁers are clearly joined to the word or words they qualify. Descriptive phrases or clauses joined to the wrong words are known as *dangling modiﬁers*.