
SENTENCE FRAGMENTS

When a sentence is grammatically incomplete, it is called a sentence fragment. Sentence fragments can be easily avoided if you know how to spot them and how they usually occur.

Complete Sentences:

In order for a sentence to be considered “complete,” it must contain both a subject and a verb. Complete sentences must also contain an entire complete thought. The sentences that follow are grammatically complete:

- I (subject) laughed (verb).
- The girl (subject) chased (verb) the tiny puppy across the park.
- My professor (subject) was (verb) late to class today.

The following sections outline the most common causes of sentence fragments.

Sentences Missing a Subject:

Writers sometimes create sentence fragments by forgetting to give their sentences subjects. This often happens when the subject is clearly written in the sentence before or after but has been left out of the sentence in question. The underlined portion of the following passage is a sentence fragment:

- The boy sprinted across the field. Chasing the ball. As soon as he reached it, he kicked the soccer ball as hard as he could toward the goal.

Notice that the underlined portion contains a verb (chasing) but does not contain a subject. Although the intended subject is obvious (the boy), the underlined portion is still technically a sentence fragment because it does not have a subject performing its verb.

Sentences Missing a Verb:

On the other hand, writers sometimes create sentence fragments by forgetting to give their sentences verbs. As with missing subject, this usually happens when the verb is clearly written in the sentence before or after but has been left out of the sentence in question. The underlined portion of the following passage is a sentence fragment:

- Benny decided to pick up a few items at the grocery store after work. Milk, eggs, and frosting. After he made his purchases, Benny drove to his house and started making a cake.

Notice that the underlined portion contains a subject (milk, eggs, and frosting) but does not contain a verb. Although the intended verb is obvious (pick up), the underlined portion is still technically a sentence fragment because it does not have a verb being performed by its compound subject.

Unfinished Subordinating Clauses:

Writers also mistakenly create sentence fragments when they do not complete their subordinating clauses (independent clauses that have been turned into dependent clauses by a subordinating conjunction). The following sentence contains a subordinate clause (underlined portion) that has been correctly attached to an independent clause:

- Although I felt hungry, I decided to wait for Samantha to arrive before I started eating.

Notice that the underlined portion of the sentence could be a sentence on its own if “although” were deleted. Consequently, “although” acts as a subordinating conjunction, making the entire clause dependent on an independent clause in order to form a complete sentence. The subordinate clause cannot be a sentence on its own. The underlined portion in the following passage is a subordinate clause that has been incorrectly separated from its independent clause, resulting in a sentence fragment:

- I went to the store to pick up one gallon of milk. After I arrived at the store. I noticed that the milk was on sale.

In the example above, “I arrived at the store” could be a sentence by itself. However, because “after” has been included at the beginning of the clause, it is now dependent on more information. It can no longer stand on its own. To fix the sentence fragment that has been created, the writer would need to replace the period after “store” with a comma.