

Rules of Thumb

A Guide for Writers

THIRD EDITION

Jay Silverman
Elaine Hughes

Recognizing Complete Sentences

At the heart of every sentence—no matter how complicated—is a subject-verb combination.

To recognize a complete sentence, you need to recognize its true subject and verb.

□ SIMPLE SENTENCES

- A sentence always has a *subject* and a *verb*:

I won.
Phillippe snores.
This soup is cold.

I, Phillippe, soup are the subjects; *won, snores, is* are the verbs. Notice that the verb enables the subject to *do* or *be* something.

These very short sentences have only a one-word subject and a one-word verb.

- Sentences can have more than one subject and more than one verb:

Tracy and Pete have a new home. (two subjects)
They bought an old house and restored it. (two verbs)

- Sometimes the subject is understood to be "you," the reader; the sentence is usually a command or a direction:

Avoid submerging this product in water.
Walk two blocks past the traffic light.

- Usually a word or phrase completes the subject and verb:

Janeen walks three miles a day.
Suzanne spent all of her savings.
Grasshoppers are lazy.

This is my latest fiancé.

The "blow torch murders" were committed by the least likely suspect—the grandmother.

- Sometimes a word or group of words introduces the main part of a sentence:

However, the bar is closed.

For example, Mona screams when she talks.

Then we drove a thousand miles.

At the end of the game, the umpire and the pitcher got into a fight.

In the cabin by the lake, you'll find the paddles and life jackets.

For more information about recognizing subjects and verbs, see "Verb Agreement," page 54.

COMPOUND OR COORDINATE SENTENCES

Two complete sentences can be joined to make a *compound*, or *coordinate*, sentence.

Sometimes the two sentences are joined by a comma and one of the following connecting words:

and	so	or	for
but	yet	nor	

Janeen walks three miles a day, but she still eats junk food.

Suzanne spent all of her savings, and now she has to start using her credit cards.

Sometimes the two sentences are connected by a semicolon.

Grasshoppers are lazy; they are not very hard to catch.

COMPLEX OR SUBORDINATE SENTENCES

Sometimes a sentence has two parts—the main part (a complete short sentence) and a *subordinated* part (a complete short sentence preceded by a *subordinating* word, such as *because*, *although*, *if*, *when*, *after*, and *while*).

I feed my snakes when I get home.

Suzanne has spent all of her savings because her brother is ill.

Notice in the first sentence that "I feed my snakes" could be a complete sentence. On the other hand, "when I get home" is not complete by itself. In the second sentence, "because her brother is ill" is also incomplete if used by itself.

The two parts of each sentence are reversible:

When I get home, I feed my snakes.

Because her brother is ill, Suzanne has spent all of her savings.

There is such a thing as a *compound-complex sentence*. This type of sentence occurs when one or both halves of a compound sentence have subordinated parts.

Suzanne always seemed to be a skinflint, but she has spent all her savings because her brother is ill.

Sentence Fragments and Run-on Sentences

To decide whether to use a period or a comma, look at what comes before and after the punctuation.

Often you reach a pause in your writing, and you wonder, "Do I put a comma or a period?" The length of a sentence has nothing to do with the right choice. You need to look at what comes before and after the punctuation to see whether you have two separate sentences or a single sentence with a fragment attached to it.

□ RECOGNIZING SENTENCE FRAGMENTS

Many sentence fragments may appear to be complete sentences, but they have elements that make them incomplete.

Words That Rarely Begin Sentences

Certain words *almost never* begin sentences:

such as	which	} except in a question
especially	who	
not	whose	
like, just like	how	
the same as	what	

In most cases, put a comma or a dash before these words.

Incorrect: We had to drain the pipes after every vacation. Especially in the winter.

They gave me one lousy dollar. Which was a full day's pay.

N. C. Wyeth illustrated many children's books. Such as Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island*.

Correct: We had to drain the pipes after every vacation, especially in the winter.

They gave me one lousy dollar, which was a full day's pay.

N. C. Wyeth illustrated many children's books—such as Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island*.

Subordinating Words

Certain words always begin *half* a sentence—either the first half or the second half. These are called *subordinating words*:

when	if
before	because
after	although (even though)
as	unless
while	whereas

A sentence fragment frequently begins with a subordinating word.

Incorrect: Although Janeen walks three miles a day.

When Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo.

You can fix these fragments by connecting each fragment to the sentence before or after it.

Correct: Although Janeen walks three miles a day, she still has to watch her diet.

Janeen still has to watch her diet although she walks three miles a day.

When Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo, the whole world was plunged into war.

The whole world was plunged into war when Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo.

You can also drop the subordinating word.

Correct: Janeen walks three miles a day.

Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo.

A subtle point: Watch out for *and*. Putting *and* between a fragment and a sentence doesn't fix the fragment.

Still Although Janeen walks three miles a day and she still watches her diet.

Correct: Although Janeen walks three miles a day and she still watches her diet, she has not yet reached her goal.

Verbs Ending in *ing*

Verbs ending in *ing* cannot serve as the main verb of a sentence:

Incorrect: The boys ran toward the ocean. Leaping across the hot sand.

I have three good friends. One being my cousin.

I love walking in the evening and taking in nature's beauty. The sun setting over the prairie. The wind blowing the tall grass.

One solution is to connect the fragment to the preceding sentence.

Correct: The boys ran toward the ocean, leaping across the hot sand.

I love walking in the evening and taking in nature's beauty—the sun setting over the prairie and the wind blowing the tall grass.

The second solution is to change the *-ing* verb to a complete verb.

Correct: They leaped across the hot sand. One is my cousin.

An *-ing* verb *can* begin a sentence if a complete verb comes later.

Correct: Leaping across the hot sand hurts my feet.

To Verbs

To verbs (*to be*, *to feel*) also frequently begin fragments.

Incorrect: I went back home to talk to my father. To tell him how I feel.

Keep this hairdryer away from the sink. To avoid submersion in water.

Fix these fragments by connecting them to the sentence before or by adding a subject and verb:

Correct: I went back home to talk to my father, to tell him how I feel.

I went back home to talk to my father. I needed to tell him how I feel.

Keep this hairdryer away from the sink to avoid submersion in water.

Keep this hairdryer away from the sink. You must avoid submerging it in water.

A *to* verb can begin a sentence if a complete verb comes later.

Correct: To talk to my father always calms me down.

Repeated Words

A repeated word can create a fragment.

Incorrect: Elizabeth's the ideal cat. A cat who both plays and purrs.

I believe that Whitman is our greatest poet. That he singlehandedly began modern American poetry.

The best solution here is to replace the period with a comma.

Correct: Elizabeth's the ideal cat, a cat who both plays and purrs.

I believe that Whitman is our greatest poet, that he singlehandedly began modern American poetry.

Note: *That* rarely begins a sentence, except when it points, as in "That was the year of the great flood."

Using Fragments for Style

You will notice that professional writers sometimes use sentence fragments for emphasis or style. Be sure you have control over fragments before you experiment. In the right spot, fragments can be very strong.

□ RECOGNIZING RUN-ON SENTENCES

A run-on sentence happens when you have two complete sentences, but you have only a comma or no punctuation between them. Run-ons usually occur because the two sentences are closely related. The two most common spots where run-ons occur are

- When a pronoun begins the second sentence:

Incorrect: The light floated toward us, it gave an eerie glow.

Correct: The light floated toward us. It gave an eerie glow.

Incorrect: Ralph decided to move to Paris, he wanted to be a writer.

Correct: Ralph decided to move to Paris. He wanted to be a writer.

- When *however* begins the second sentence:

Incorrect: Mosquitoes in the United States are just an annoyance, however in many countries they are a health hazard.

Correct: Mosquitoes in the United States are just an annoyance. However, in many countries they are a health hazard.

How to Fix Run-on Sentences

Incorrect: I went to Gorman's Ice Cream parlor, I ordered a triple hot fudge sundae.

Suzanne spent all of her savings now she is flat broke.

- The simplest way to fix a run-on sentence is to put a period or semicolon between the two sentences:

Correct: I went to Gorman's Ice Cream Parlor. I ordered a triple hot fudge sundae.

Suzanne spent all of her savings. Now she is flat broke.

(Remember that it is perfectly correct to have two or three short sentences in a row.)

Correct: I went to Gorman's Ice Cream parlor; I ordered a triple hot fudge sundae.

Suzanne spent all of her savings; now she is flat broke.

- Here are two other ways to fix run-on sentences:

Put a comma and a conjunction between the two sentences. The conjunctions are *and*, *but*, *so*, *yet*, *for*, *or*, and *nor*.

Correct: I went to Gorman's Ice Cream Parlor, and I ordered a triple hot fudge sundae.

Suzanne spent all of her savings, so now she is flat broke.

Use a subordinating word with one of the sentences:

Correct: I went to Gorman's Ice Cream Parlor, where I ordered a triple hot fudge sundae.

Because Suzanne spent all of her savings, now she is flat broke.

Commas

You don't need a comma every time you breathe. Here are four places you need them.

- Put a comma before *and*, *but*, *so*, *yet*, *or*, *for*, and *nor* when they connect two sentences.

The roads are slick, but you can make it.

Gina intended to win the weight-lifting pageant, and that's exactly what she did.

They called me in for a job interview, so I had to get new shoes.

Not only did Melva run a restaurant, but she also wrote a cookbook.

However, don't automatically stick in a comma just because a sentence is long.

The short man smoking a cigar and shouting at the hostess is my uncle Jules.

- Use commas between parts of a series of three or more.

I bought Perrier, Wheat Thins, and Velveeta for my party.

Diamond climbed up the ladder, marched to the end of the diving board, took a big spring, and came down in a belly bust.

In the class sat a bearded man, a police officer, a woman eating a sandwich, and a parakeet.

(Without the comma, what happens to the parakeet?)

Don't use a comma in a pair.

I bought Perrier and Velveeta.

Curt and Rixana are joining us this afternoon and going for a boat ride.

Mary Ellen's mother handed out hard candies and made us sit while she played the piano.

- Use a comma after an introductory part of a sentence.

However, the truth finally came out.

For example, you can learn how to fix a leaky faucet.

After we got home, she gave me a cup of that terrible herb tea.

When James walked in, the whole family was laughing hysterically.

- Surround an insertion or interruption with a *pair* of commas. Both commas are necessary.

The truth, however, finally came out.

Woody Guthrie, the father of Arlo Guthrie, wrote "This Land Is Your Land."

My cousin, who thinks she is always right, was dead wrong.

Milton, even though no one had invited him, arrived first at the party.

Places and *dates* are treated as insertions. Note especially that commas surround the year and the state.

The hospital was in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, not far from Omro. I was born on August 15, 1954, at seven in the morning.

Semicolons

Semicolons can be used instead of periods; they also can separate parts of a complicated list.

- Use a semicolon to connect two related sentences; each half must be a complete sentence.

He was fat; she was thin.

Hope for the best; plan for the worst.

I'll never forget the day of the circus; that's when I met the trapeze artist who changed my life.

It's not that O'Hara's position is wrong; it's that he misses the key point.

A semicolon often comes before certain transition words; a comma follows the transition.

however	therefore	otherwise
nevertheless	in other words	instead
for example	on the other hand	meanwhile
besides	furthermore	unfortunately

Schubert was a great composer; however, Beethoven was greater.

The bank lost two of my deposits; therefore, I am closing my account.

Semicolons work best when used to emphasize a strong connection between the two sentences.

- Use semicolons instead of commas in a list when some of the parts already have commas.

To make it as an actor, you need, first of all, some natural talent; second, the habits of discipline and concentration; and third, the ability to promote yourself.

Colons

Colons create suspense: they can set up a list, a quotation, or an emphatic statement.

Use a colon after a complete sentence to introduce related details.

Before a colon you must have a *complete statement*. Don't use a colon after *are* or *include* or *such as*.

Colons can introduce

- A list
I came home loaded with supplies: a tent, a sleeping bag, and a pack.
- A quotation
The author begins with a shocker: "Mother spent her summer sitting naked on a rock."
- An example
I love to eat legumes: for example, beans or lentils.
- An emphatic assertion
This is the bottom line: I refuse to work for only \$5.00 an hour.

Use a colon before a subtitle.

Pablo Picasso: The Playful Artist

When you type, leave two spaces after a colon.

Dashes and Parentheses

Dashes and parentheses separate a word or remark from the rest of the sentence.

□ DASHES

Dashes highlight the part of the sentence they separate, or show an abrupt change of thought in mid-sentence, or connect a fragment to a sentence.

Alberta Hunter—still singing at the age of eighty—performed nightly at The Cookery in New York City.

At night the forest is magical and fascinating—and yet it terrifies me.

Living the high life—that's what I want.

Dashes are very handy; they can replace a period, comma, colon, or semicolon. However, they are usually informal, so don't use many—or you will seem to have dashed off your paper.

When you type, two hyphens make a dash; there is no space before or after the dash.

□ PARENTHESES

Parentheses de-emphasize the words they separate. Use them to enclose brief explanations or interruptions. They can contain either part of a sentence or a whole sentence.

I demanded a reasonable sum (\$10.50 an hour), and they met my request.

Polly's last movie disappointed both fans and critics. (See the attached reviews.)

Mayme drives slowly (she claims her car won't go over forty miles per hour), so she gets tickets for causing traffic jams.

- Put any necessary punctuation *after* the second parenthesis if the parentheses contain part of a sentence.

- If the parentheses contain a complete sentence, put the period *inside* the second parenthesis. Notice, however, that you don't capitalize or use a period when parentheses enclose a sentence within a sentence.

Be sparing with parentheses. Too many can chop up your sentences.