

Fragments, Run-Ons, and Comma Splices

A Complete Sentence: The Basics

To have a complete sentence, you must have the following three components:

1. **a subject** (the actor or actors in the sentence, usually a noun)
2. **a verb** (the action in the sentence) -and-
3. **a complete thought** (the sentence can stand alone and make sense- it is independent)

A complete sentence is also called an independent clause because it is independent and can stand on its own. Some complete sentences are short and only two words in length:

Example: Dogs bark.

This sentence has a subject (*dogs*) and a verb (*bark*). This sentence also expresses a complete thought. In other words, we can understand this sentence completely, and we are not left needing additional information to understand the idea contained in this sentence. The key to determining if your sentence is a complete sentence is to locate the subject, the verb, and the complete thought. This can be difficult with longer and more complex sentences. Some complete sentences are quite long and contain many words:

Example: Every summer, the neighborhood dogs bark when the ice cream truck comes slowly rolling up the street playing music and summoning kids from all around to buy a treat.

This sentence contains the same subject (*dogs*) and the same verb (*bark*). It still expresses a complete thought, but it also has a lot more words and information. The longer a sentence gets, the more difficult it can be to determine if it is complete. However, if you remove the subject (*dogs*) and the verb (*bark*) no other portion of the sentence can stand on its own and make sense as a complete thought. With the subject and verb, the sentence does form a complete thought, and therefore, it is a complete sentence.

Sentence Fragments

A sentence fragment is an incomplete sentence. Some fragments are incomplete because they lack either a subject, a verb, or both. However, most of the fragments that students have trouble with are dependent clauses—they have a subject and a verb, so they look like complete sentences, but they do not express a complete thought. They are called “dependent” because they

cannot stand on their own as complete sentences. The following are some examples of dependent clause sentence fragments:

Because Drake is a Canadian citizen (...because what? What did Drake do?)

If you want to post to Instagram (...if what? What do you need to do to post?)

When you finally graduate from Shaw (...what will happen?)

Since I am originally from Texas (...what is the case since you are from Texas?)

After she pledged for the sorority (...what happened after she pledged?)

Each of these examples has both a subject and a verb, which are underlined. So why are they dependent clause sentence fragments? The reason is because each begins with a dependent word, also known as a subordinating conjunction. These subordinating conjunctions are highlighted in each sentence above. Subordinating conjunctions have three primary purposes:

1. to join two sentences together
 - a. *They went on vacation because they won the lottery.*
2. to make one of the sentences dependent on the other for a complete thought
 - a. *Before she left for school, she grabbed her phone and keys.*
3. to indicate a logical relationship
 - a. *Since I bought that car myself, I can drive it whenever I want.*

To fix sentence fragments or verify that the sentence is not a fragment, you must (1) identify the subject, the verb, and the complete thought. Then (2) review the sentence for any subordinating conjunctions. If you find one, (3) identify the dependent clause it is attached to. Finally, (4) make sure that dependent clause is attached to an independent clause. Take the following example:

Unless you take ENG 111, you cannot graduate from Shaw.

1. The subject in this sentence is “you” and the verb is “cannot graduate.” The thought is completed with the addition of “from Shaw.”
2. This sentence does have one subordinating conjunction: “unless.”
3. The dependent clause this subordinating conjunction is attached to is “unless you take ENG 111.”
4. This dependent clause is attached to the independent clause “you cannot graduate from Shaw.” Therefore, this is not a fragment and is correct.

Run-on Sentences

A run-on sentence, also called a fused sentence, occurs when you have two or more complete sentences (independent clauses) that are joined together without being separated properly. The following is an example of a run-on sentence:

My girlfriend posted a video of me on TikTok it was so embarrassing!

Although this may appear to be a single sentence, it is actually two complete sentences that are not properly separated. The first complete sentence is “my girlfriend posted a video of me on

TikTok.” In this sentence, the subject is “*my girlfriend,*” the verb is “*posted,*” and “*a video of me on TikTok*” completes the thought. The second complete sentence is “*it was so embarrassing!*” In this sentence, the subject is “*it,*” the verb is “*was,*” and “*so embarrassing!*” completes the thought. Since these two complete sentences are not separated in any way, this is a run-on sentence.

Fortunately, there are multiple methods for fixing run-on sentences. Each method involves either properly separating the complete sentences within the run-on or making one of the complete sentences a dependent clause:

1. **Use a semicolon:** a semicolon (;) is most commonly used to link two complete sentences together that are closely related in thought or idea. Note that the sentence after the semicolon does not capitalize the first word unless it is a proper noun.
 - a. *My girlfriend posted a video of me on TikTok; it was so embarrassing!*
2. **Use a period:** a period is most commonly used to separate complete sentences. We use periods all the time when we write, so you can simply separate the two complete sentences with a period.
 - a. *My girlfriend posted a video of me on TikTok. It was so embarrassing!*
3. **Use a comma and a coordinating conjunction:** a comma followed by a coordinating conjunction is one of the most common methods to connect two complete sentences together. There are seven coordinating conjunctions in the English language (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so), and you must choose one of the seven.
 - a. *My girlfriend posted a video of me on TikTok, and it was so embarrassing!*
4. **Use a subordinating conjunction:** remember that a subordinating conjunction is a dependent word that makes a sentence a dependent clause. Some examples of subordinating conjunctions include (because, since, although, however, where, if, unless, which, when, after etc.). If you add a subordinating conjunction to the first complete sentence in a run on, you will need to add a comma afterwards.
 - a. *When my girlfriend posted a video of me on TikTok, it was so embarrassing!*

Finally, make sure that you do not make the common mistake of trying to connect the complete sentences with just a comma. This creates another type of run-on error called a comma splice.