

Sentence Boundaries



Many student writers struggle with sentence boundaries and are prone to fragments, run-ons, and convoluted prose. This handout will address basic sentence structure and common errors. It is also important to have a feeling for the *limits* of a sentence; you may have constructed a sentence that is technically correct, but if it's overly long and complex your reader will struggle to understand its meaning.

Sentence Patterns

To be grammatically correct, a sentence must contain both a **subject**, which identifies what the sentence is about, and a **predicate**, which says or asks something about the subject or tells the subject to do something.

A **clause** is a group of words containing a subject and a predicate. **Independent clauses** can stand alone as complete sentences: *The dog is hungry.* **Dependent clauses** cannot stand alone; they must be linked to an independent clause: *The dog is hungry, so we'd better feed it.*
└ INDEPENDENT ┘ └ DEPENDENT ┘

There are four types of sentences. Once you understand the different ways a sentence can be constructed, you can analyze your own writing and improve it by varying your sentence patterns.

1. **Simple sentences** consist of one independent clause and no dependent clause.

The yard is surrounded by a white picket fence.

The bicycles and skateboards are stored in the small shed.

At practice, the coach and her assistant run drills and review strategies.

2. **Compound sentences** consist of two or more independent clauses and no dependent clause. The clauses may be joined by a comma and a coordinating conjunction, or by a semi colon.

Sometimes I ignore my alarm clock, and I have to rush to get to class.

James is obsessed with baseball; he eats, breathes, and lives the game.

3. **Complex sentences** consist of one independent clause and at least one dependent clause.

Many students think that grammar is tricky.
└ DEPENDENT ┘

Those who are afraid of heights should not climb the Eiffel Tower.
└ DEPENDENT ┘

As I waited in line, I stood beside another customer who complained loudly about the wait.
└ DEPENDENT ┘ └ DEPENDENT ┘

4. **Compound-complex sentences** consist of two or more independent clauses and at least one dependent clause.

I complimented Joe when he finished the job, and he seemed pleased.
└ INDEPENDENT ┘ └ DEPENDENT ┘ └ INDEPENDENT ┘

*You may have noticed that clauses can contain **compound subjects and/or compound predicates**. A compound subject contains two or more nouns attached to same verb, and a compound predicate contains two or more verbs that have the same subject.

Compound subject: *The boy and his father played baseball.*

Compound predicate: *The boy ate dinner, did his homework, and watched TV.*

Compound subject and predicate: *The boy and his father threw the ball and practiced running bases.*

Sentence Boundary Errors

Remember, a complete sentence must have a **subject** and a **predicate**, and it must be a **complete thought** (it can stand alone and make sense). Understanding the four different sentence patterns and the definition of a complete sentence will help you identify sentence boundary errors in your own writing.

Fragments

A sentence fragment is an incomplete sentence. Although fragments are commonly used in conversation and even in some informal forms of writing, they are not appropriate in academic writing. They confuse the meaning of your sentence, are distracting to readers, and will be regarded as errors. To correct your fragments, you can combine them with nearby independent clauses, or add words to make them a complete sentence.

For example:

- *NBC will broadcast the debates. With discussions afterwards.* —————> *NBC will broadcast the debates, with discussions afterwards.*
- *Jane didn't return to work for three weeks after her surgery. To let her knee fully heal.* —————> *Jane didn't return to work for three weeks. She wanted to let her knee fully heal.*
- *William Shakespeare wrote many plays. Such as Hamlet and Macbeth.* —————> *William Shakespeare wrote many plays, such as Hamlet and Macbeth.*
- *Being more productive. That was one of my New Year's resolutions.* —————> *Being more productive was one of*

Run-Ons and Comma Splices*

A **run-on or fused** sentence results from joining two or more independent clauses **without** using proper punctuation or connecting words. A **comma splice** occurs when independent clauses are separated only by a comma. The easiest way to correct fused sentences and comma splices is to separate them into two sentences.

For example:

- *My mother likes to work in the garden she grows beautiful sunflowers.* —————> *My mother likes to work in the garden. She grows beautiful sunflowers.*
- *John hikes a different section of the Appalachian Trail every year, it's his favorite way to spend summer break.*
—> *John hikes a different section of the Appalachian Trail every year. It's his favorite way to spend summer break.*

If the ideas in the two clauses are closely related, you can join them with a comma and a coordinating conjunction, or with a semicolon.

- *I woke up with a headache, I took some aspirin.* —————> *I woke up with a headache, so I took some aspirin.*
- *I need to pay my tuition I don't have enough money.* —————> *I need to pay my tuition, but I don't have enough money.*
- *Happiness is an abstract idea it means different things to different people.* —> *Happiness is an abstract idea; it means different things to different people.*

Style and sentence boundaries

Learning how to correctly combine independent clauses is important because short sentences are often considered “choppy” and undesirable in academic contexts. However, an overly long and complex sentence, even if it is technically correct, may make it hard for a reader to follow your meaning. If you find that your sentences continue for multiple lines on the page and frequently contain compound subjects and/or predicates, consider separating the independent clauses to enhance the clarity of your writing.

Read the following grammatically-correct sentence, and consider how you might break it up:

When considering which college to attend, it is important to identify which elements of a college education are most important to you, then conduct a widespread search of all institutions that fit those criteria, and finally narrow the list down to an appropriate number of schools, including reach and safety choices, so that you can be confident in the knowledge that, no matter which college you end up attending, you have considered all of the options available to you and haven't overlooked any schools that may have been a great fit.

If you find that your sentences have many commas, colons, or semicolons, or that you've tacked on several dependent clauses beginning with “who,” “which,” or “that,” identify the main points and separate them out into multiple sentences. This process may also reveal redundancies in your writing. Try breaking up this sentence as well:

James, who didn't complete his homework, which was due that morning, as required by the teacher, arrived late to class, which was against the school's rules, and went nosily to his seat, slamming his bag on his desk, which he had defiled with permanent marker, and refusing to take out his textbook or his binder, which should have contained his completed homework, but didn't because he hadn't done it, an offense for which he was about to receive detention.

For additional information regarding sentence boundaries and extra tips for making your sentences stylistically stronger, refer to the following Writing Center handouts:

- **Comma Splices**
- **Commas**
- **Cutting Clutter**
- **Parallel Structure**
- **Semi-colons**
- **Sentence Clarity**
- **Transitions**

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References: Lunsford, Andrea A., ed. *The St. Martin's Handbook: Seventh Edition*. Boston, New York: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2011. Print.

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