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Sentence Fragments

A **sentence fragment** is part of a sentence that is set off as if it were a whole sentence by an initial capital letter and a final period or other end punctuation. Although writers occasionally use fragments deliberately and effectively (see p. 341), readers perceive most fragments as serious errors because, expecting complete sentences, they find partial sentences distracting or confusing. (Before reading further, you may find it helpful to review pp. 233–41 and 252–56 on sentences and clauses.)

Note A grammar and style checker can spot many but not all sentence fragments, and it may flag sentences that are actually correct commands, such as *Continue reading*.

17a Test your sentences for completeness, and revise any fragments.

The following three tests will help you determine whether a word group punctuated as a sentence is actually a complete sentence. If the word group does not pass *all three* tests, it is a fragment and needs to be revised.

v Test 1: Find the verb.

Look for a verb in the group of words. If you do not have one, the word group is a fragment:

Fragment	Uncountable numbers of sites on the World Wide Web.
Revised	Uncountable numbers of sites make up the World Wide Web.

Any verb form you find must be a **finite verb**, one that changes form as indicated below. A verbal does not change; it cannot serve as a sentence verb without the aid of a helping verb.

	Finite verbs in complete sentences	Verbals in sentence fragments
Singular	The network grows.	The network growing.
Plural	Networks grow.	Networks growing.
Present	The network grows.	
Past	The network grew.	The network growing.
Future	The network will grow.	

Some languages allow forms of *be* to be omitted as helping or linking verbs. But English requires stating forms of *be*:

Fragments	The network growing. It already larger than its developers anticipated.
Revised	The network is growing. It is already larger than its developers anticipated.

v Test 2: Find the subject.

If you find a finite verb, look for its subject by asking *who* or *what* performs the action or makes the assertion of the verb. The subject of the sentence will usually come before the verb. If there is no subject, the word group is probably a fragment:

Fragment	And has great popular appeal.
Revised	And the Web has great popular appeal.

In one kind of complete sentence, a command, the subject *you* is understood: [*You*]

Experiment with the Web.

Some languages allow the omission of the sentence subject, especially when it is a pronoun. But in English, except in commands, the subject is always stated:

Fragments	Web commerce is expanding dramatically. Is threatening traditional stores.
Revised	Web commerce is expanding dramatically. It is threatening traditional stores.

✓ **Test 3: Make sure the clause is not subordinate.**

A subordinate clause usually begins with a subordinating word:

Subordinating conjunctions			Relative pronouns	
after	once	until	that	who/whom
although	since	when	which	whoever/whomever
as	than	where		whose
because	that	whereas		
if		unless	while	

(See p. 253 for a longer list of subordinating conjunctions.)

Subordinate clauses serve as parts of sentences (nouns or modifiers), not as whole sentences:

Fragment	When the government devised the Internet.
Revised	The government devised the Internet.
Revised	When the government devised the Internet, no expansive computer network existed.

Fragment	The reason that the government devised the Internet.
Revised	The reason that the government devised the Internet was to provide secure links among departments and defense contractors.

Note Questions beginning with *how*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *which*, *who*, *whom*, *whose*, and *why* are not sentence fragments: *Who was responsible? When did it happen?*

✓ **Revising sentence fragments**

Almost all sentence fragments can be corrected in one of two ways, the choice depending on the importance of the information in the fragment:

- ✓ **Rewrite the fragment as a complete sentence**, giving the information in the fragment the same importance as that in other complete sentences:

Fragment	A major improvement of the Internet occurred with the World Wide Web. Which allows users to move easily between sites.
Revised	A major improvement of the Internet occurred with the World Wide Web. It allows users to move easily between sites.

Two main clauses may be separated by a semicolon instead of a period (see p. 453).

- ✓ **Combine the fragment with a main clause**, subordinating the information in the fragment to the information in the main clause:

Fragment	The Web is easy to use. Loaded with links and graphics.
Revised	The Web, loaded with links and graphics, is easy to use.

Punctuating corrected fragments

In the preceding example, commas separate the inserted phrase from the rest of the sentence because the phrase is not essential to the meaning of any word in the main clause but simply adds information (see p. 435). When a phrase or subordinate clause *is* essential to the meaning of a word in the main clause, a comma or commas do *not* separate the two elements:

Fragment	With the links, users can move to other Web sites. That they want to consult.
Revised	With the links, users can move to other Web sites that they want to consult.

Sometimes a fragment may be combined with the main clause using a colon or a dash (see pp. 477 and 480, respectively):

Fragment The Web connects sites from all over the Internet. Different databases, different software, different machines.

Revised The Web connects sites from all over the Internet: different databases, different software, different machines.

Fragment The Web is a boon to researchers. A vast and accessible library.

Revised The Web is a boon to researchers—a vast and accessible library.

EXERCISE 17.1 Identifying and revising sentence fragments

Apply the tests for completeness to each of the following word groups. If a word group is a complete sentence, mark the number preceding it. If it is a sentence fragment, revise it in two ways: by making it a complete sentence, and by combining it with a main clause written from the information given in other items. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

Example:

And could not find his money. [The word group has a verb (*could find*) but no subject.]

Revised into a complete sentence: And he could not find his money.

Combined with a new main clause: He was lost and could not find his money.

1. In an interesting article about vandalism against works of art.
2. The motives of the vandals varying widely.
3. Those who harm artwork are usually angry.
4. But not necessarily at the artist or the owner.
5. For instance, a man who hammered at Michelangelo's *Pietà*.
6. And knocked off the Virgin Mary's nose.
7. Because he was angry at the Roman Catholic Church.
8. Which knew nothing of his grievance.
9. Although many damaged works can be repaired.
10. Usually even the most skillful repairs are forever visible.

17b A subordinate clause is not a complete sentence.

Subordinate clauses contain both subjects and verbs, but they always begin with a subordinating conjunction (*although, if, and so on*) or a relative pronoun (*who, which, that*). (See pp. 252–53.) Subordinate clauses serve as nouns or modifiers, but they cannot stand alone as complete sentences.

To correct a subordinate clause set off as a sentence, combine it with the main clause or remove or change the subordinating word to create a main clause.

Fragment Many pine trees bear large cones. Which appear in August.

Revised Many pine trees bear large cones, which appear in August.

Revised Many pine trees bear large cones. They appear in August.

17c A verbal phrase or a prepositional phrase is not a complete sentence.

A **verbal phrase** consists of an infinitive (*to choose*), a past participle (*chosen*), or a present participle or gerund (*choosing*) together with any objects and modifiers it may have (see p. 249). A verbal phrase is a noun or modifier and cannot serve as the verb in a complete sentence:

Fragment For many of the elderly, their house is their only asset. Offering some security but no income.

Revised For many of the elderly, their house is their only asset, offering some security but no income.

Revised For many of the elderly, their house is their only asset. It offers some security but no income.

A **prepositional phrase** is a modifier consisting of a preposition (such as *in*, *on*, *to*, and *with*) together with its object and any modifiers (see p. 245). A prepositional phrase cannot stand alone as a complete sentence:

Fragment In a squeeze between a valuable asset and little income. Eventually many elderly people sell their homes.

Revised In a squeeze between a valuable asset and little income, eventually many elderly people sell their homes.

Revised Many elderly people are in a squeeze between a valuable asset and little income. Eventually they may sell their homes.

Some English prepositions consist of two or three words: *as well as*, *along with*, *in addition to*, *on top of*, and others. Don't let prepositions of more than one word mislead you into writing sentence fragments.

Fragment In today's retirement communities, the elderly may have health care, housekeeping, and new friends. As well as financial security.

Revised In today's retirement communities, the elderly may have health care, housekeeping, and new friends, as well as financial security.

17d Any word group lacking a subject or a verb or both is not a complete sentence.

We often follow a noun with a modifier. No matter how long the noun and its modifier are, they cannot stand alone as a sentence:

Fragments People waving flags and cheering. Lined the streets for the parade.

Revised People waving flags and cheering lined the streets for the parade.

Fragment Veterans who fought in Vietnam. They are finally being honored.

Revised Veterans who fought in Vietnam are finally being honored.

Appositives are nouns, or nouns and their modifiers, that rename or describe other nouns (see p. 257). They cannot stand alone as sentences:

Fragment When I was a child, my favorite adult was an old uncle. A retired sea captain who always told me long stories of wild adventures in faraway places.

Revised When I was a child, my favorite adult was an old uncle, a retired sea captain who always told me long stories of wild adventures in faraway places.

Compound predicates are predicates made up of two or more verbs and their objects, if any (see p. 258). A verb or its object cannot stand alone as a sentence:

Fragment Uncle Marlon drew out his tales. And embellished them.

Revised Uncle Marlon drew out his tales and embellished them.

Fragment He described characters he had met. And storms at sea.

Revised He described characters he had met and storms at sea.

Note Beginning a sentence with a coordinating conjunction such as *and* or *but* can lead to a sentence fragment. Check every sentence you begin with a coordinating conjunction to be sure it is complete.

EXERCISE 17.2 Revising: Sentence fragments

Correct any sentence fragment below either by combining it with a main clause or by making it a main clause. If an item contains no sentence fragment, mark the number preceding it. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

Example:

Jujitsu is good for self-protection. Because it enables one to overcome an opponent without the use of weapons.

Jujitsu is good for self-protection because it enables one to overcome an opponent without the use of weapons.

1. Human beings who perfume themselves. They are not much different from other animals.
2. Animals as varied as insects and dogs release *pheromones*. Chemicals that signal other animals.
3. Human beings have a diminished sense of smell. And do not consciously detect most of their own species' pheromones.
4. The human substitute for pheromones may be perfumes. Especially musk and other fragrances derived from animal oils.
5. Some sources say that humans began using perfume to cover up the smell of burning flesh. During sacrifices to the gods.
6. Perfumes became religious offerings in their own right. Being expensive to make, they were highly prized.
7. The earliest historical documents from the Middle East record the use of fragrances. Not only in religious ceremonies but on the body.
8. In the nineteenth century chemists began synthesizing perfume oils. Which previously could be made only from natural sources.
9. The most popular animal oil for perfume today is musk. Although some people dislike its heavy, sweet odor.
10. Synthetic musk oil would help conserve a certain species of deer. Whose gland is the source of musk.

17e Be aware of the acceptable uses of incomplete sentences.

A few word groups lacking the usual subject-predicate combination are not sentence fragments because they conform to the expectations of most readers. They include exclamations (*Oh no!*); questions and answers (*Where next? To Kansas.*); and commands (*Move along. Shut the window.*). Another kind of incomplete sentence, occurring in special situations, is the transitional phrase (*So much for the causes, now for the results. One final point.*).

Experienced writers sometimes use sentence fragments when they want to achieve a special effect. Such fragments appear more in informal than in formal writing. Unless you are experienced and thoroughly secure in your own writing, you should avoid all fragments and concentrate on writing clear, well-formed sentences.

EXERCISE 17.3 Revising: Sentence fragments

Revise the following paragraph to eliminate sentence fragments by combining them with main clauses or rewriting them as main clauses. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

Baby red-eared slider turtles are brightly colored. With bold patterns on their yellowish undershells. Which serve as a warning to predators. The bright colors of skunks and other animals. They signal that the animals will spray nasty chemicals. In contrast, the turtle's colors warn largemouth bass. That the baby turtle will actively defend itself. When a bass gulps down a turtle. The feisty baby claws and bites. Forcing the bass to spit it out. To avoid a similar painful experience. The bass will avoid other baby red-eared slider turtles. The turtle loses its bright colors as it grows too big. For a bass's afternoon snack.

Note See page 381 for an exercise involving sentence fragments along with comma splices, fused sentences, and other sentence errors.

Complete sentence versus sentence fragment

A complete sentence or main clause

- ✓ contains a subject and a verb (*The wind blows*)
- ✓ and is not a subordinate clause (beginning with a word such as *be-cause* or *who*).

A sentence fragment

- ✓ lacks a verb (*The wind blowing*)
- ✓ or lacks a subject (*And blows*)
- ✓ or is a subordinate clause not attached to a complete sentence (*Be-cause the wind blows*).

<http://www.ablongman.com/littlebrown>

Visit the companion Web site for more help and additional exercises on sentence fragments.

Tests for complete sentences

Perform *all three* of the following tests to be sure your sentences are complete.

1. Find the verb.
2. Find the subject.
3. Make sure the clause is not subordinate.