Sentences and Sentence Fragments

A sentence is a word or a group of words expressing a complete thought. This handy guide will help you to be able to identify both complete sentences and fragments.

In the examples below, **subjects** are bold and **predicates** are italicized.

### Complete Sentences

A simple complete sentence.

*Obesity* is a growing health problem.

In a question, the subject and verb are usually reversed.

What *am I supposed* to do about that problem?

The subject may also be implied; in the command below, the implied subject is *you*.

*Stop! (or, You stop!)*

### Sentence Fragments

Sentence fragments express incomplete thoughts. They are also used frequently in speech, which means they often creep into your writing. Reviewing the examples below will help you to recognize some common examples of fragments and fix them so that they become complete thoughts.

**Ex. 1**

The phrase has a verb, but no subject to perform it. Therefore it is a participle phrase, not a sentence.

*Going* to the beach with a carload of kids and a trunkful of luggage.

A simple fix is to add a subject.

*I am going* to the beach with a carload of kids and a trunkful of luggage.

You could also make *Going* the subject and add a verb after the prepositional phrase.

*Going* to the beach with a carload of kids and trunkful of luggage always makes for an exciting day.

**Ex. 2**

*Experiment* is a subject and *had been repeated* is a verb. However, starting the sentence with *that* makes the sentence a subordinate clause, resulting in a fragment.

That the experiment had been repeated many times and observed by hundreds of people.
A simple fix is remove *That* from the sentence.
The *experiment* *had been repeated* many times and observed by hundreds of people.

You could also make *That the experiment had been repeated many times and observed by hundreds of people* into a subject and add a verb.
*That the experiment had been repeated many times and observed by hundreds of people* *added* to its credibility.

---

**TIP**
Other subordinating conjunctions include words such as *although, because, before, if, since, where, when,* and *unless.*

---

**Ex. 3**

The phrase below is prepositional, giving us a sense of time and place; however, it does not tell us what is happening or who is involved.
*In the halls at night, with the lights out and everyone asleep in their beds.*

A simple fix is to complete the thought, adding a subject to the sentence and having it perform an action.
*In the halls at night, when the lights were out and everyone was asleep in their beds,* a *mouse roamed* looking for crumbs.

---

**TIP**
Other prepositions include *over, on, beside, through,* and *after.*

---

**Ex. 4**

The first part here is a complete sentence, but what follows it, a description of the car, is a subordinate clause because it lacks a verb.
*John proudly drove home his new car. A shiny, red convertible with a revved-up, 350 horsepower engine under the hood.*

You could add a subject and verb to the second clause...
John proudly drove home his new car. *It was* a shiny, red convertible...

However, the result is two relatively short sentences that sound choppy when read out loud. Notice also the repetition of the subject (car/It).

A simple fix is to connect the two sentences using a comma.
John proudly *drove* home his new car, a shiny, red convertible with a revved-up, 350 horsepower engine under the hood.

---

**TIP**
In addition to eliminating fragments, you can also use this combining technique to cut down on wordiness in sentences with repetitive information.
Exceptions

All rules have exceptions, and sometimes you may find it advantageous to use a fragment for rhetorical effect. You will most often find these exceptions in creative writing.

Ex. 1

Although the italicized section is a fragment (it lacks a verb), it is used to emphasize the feeling that our unnamed narrator is experiencing.
It was the feeling it gave me. A warm fuzzy one.

Setting the specific feeling apart as a fragment strengthens the intensity of the feeling and also places you in the mind of the speaker/writer.

Ex. 2

The same can be done with concrete objects as well as abstract thoughts and feelings.
I scanned the items on the desk when I entered the room. A computer. A legal pad. A half-eaten sandwich.

Listing items in this way gives each one a greater sense of importance; they stand out from other items on the desk and in the room.