

The Writing Lab

Sentence Fragments (1)

Handout courtesy of Angela Gulick

A sentence fragment is a group of words with a capital letter on one end and punctuation on the other, but the words do not form a complete thought. In order to recognize a sentence fragment, you need to understand what a complete sentence looks like. A complete sentence is made up of two or more parts:

- **A subject** (who or what the sentence is about)
- **A verb** (what the action is that is taking place)
- **Sometimes a “completer”** (information necessary to achieve a complete thought)

Example: **Juanita dropped.**

- **subject:** Who or what is the focus of the sentence? **Juanita**
- **verb:** What about this person? What is she doing? **Juanita dropped.**
- **completer:** Juanita dropped what? This sentence is not complete because don't what Juanita dropped (a shoe? her purse? to the floor?)

Example: **Last Christmas, when my brother Steve wrapped a 50-pound bag of bird seed in wrapping paper.**

- **subject:** Who or what is the focus of the sentence? **Steve**
- **verb:** What about this person? What is he doing? **wrapping**
- **completer:** Steve wrapped what? **a 50-pound bag of bird seed in wrapping paper.**

This sentence has a completer, but it is still not complete because it contains a “danger word” called a subordinate conjunction: **when**. Subordinate conjunctions “demote” what look like sentences and make them incomplete sentences or fragments. Some common examples of subordinate conjunctions are the following:

after	because	if	than	unless	whenever	whether
although	before	once	that	until	where	while
as	even	since	though	when	whereas	why

Sentence Fragments

The best visual metaphor you can keep in mind when talking about a sentence is a train. With any train, there is an engine that is strong enough to move the separate railway cars. Sometimes the train engine is in front of the railway cars, pulling them. Sometimes, the train engine is in back of the railway cars, pushing them. In many cases, fragments appear before or after complete sentences. They are like railway cars that have no train engine to move them.

Dependent and Independent Clauses

We talked about sentences being made up of subjects, verbs, and sometimes completers. If all three of those parts make a **complete thought**, we call that an **independent clause**. This is just a fancy term for “complete sentence.” Think of this independent clause as your train engine. On the other hand, a **dependent clause doesn't express a complete thought**. Rather, a dependent clause is like a railway car that hasn't been connected to your train engine. Dependent clauses can “connect” to sentences in three places: at the **beginning**, in the **middle**, and at the **end** of the sentence.

Example: **While you were napping.** >>> What happened while you were napping?

This isn't a complete thought yet. We have a subject (**you**) and we have a verb (**were napping**). However, this dependent clause can't stand on its own because of the subordinate conjunction **While**. In the following sentences, “the cat had four kittens” is the independent clause or the “train engine” that we can connect to the dependent clause or “railcar.”

- While you were napping, **the cat had four kittens.**
- **The cat**, while you were napping, **had four kittens.**
- **The cat had four kittens** while you were napping.

Example: **Since the weather became so cold.** >>> What has happened since the weather became so cold? In this case, we have a subject (**weather**), a verb (**became**), and a completer (**so cold**). However, this dependent clause can't stand on its own because of the subordinate conjunction **since**. In the following sentences, "Jasper hasn't been to the dog groomer" is the independent clause or the "train engine" that we can connect to the dependent clause or "railcar."

- Since the weather became so cold, **Jasper hasn't been to the dog groomer.**
- Jasper, **since the weather became so cold**, hasn't been to the dog groomer.
- **Jasper hasn't been to the dog groomer** since the weather became so cold.

Example: **Because I love Lucky Charms.** >>> What about the Lucky Charms?

In this case, we have a subject (**I**), a verb (**love**), and a completer (**Lucky Charms**). However, this dependent clause can't stand on its own because of the subordinate conjunction **Because**. In the following sentences, "I am always hopped up on sugar" is the independent clause or the "train engine" that we can connect to the dependent clause or "railcar."

- Because I love Lucky Charms, **I am always hopped up on sugar.***
- **I am**, because I love Lucky Charms, **always hopped up on sugar.***
- **I am always hopped up on sugar** because I love Lucky Charms.* **Plus, they're magically delicious.*

Dependent Clauses and Relative Pronouns

Another tricky group of words that can lead to fragments is relative pronouns: who/whom, whoever/whomever, whose, which, and that. Writers just have to be mindful that they don't leave a group of words "hanging" or disconnected from nouns and adjectives these relative pronouns are referring to.

Here are some incorrect examples:

- John Lennon was an extremely talented songwriter. **Who** was also instrumental in making people aware of peace.
- I love writing with fountain pens. **Which** have a much smoother flow of ink than ballpoint pens.
- Bonnie Consolo was a woman born with no arms. **Whose** story of dignity should inspire us all.

The **Who, Which, and Whose** "sentences" are actually fragments that need to be connected to complete sentences. Let's look at the corrected versions:

- John Lennon was an extremely talented songwriter who was also instrumental in making people aware of peace.
- I love writing with fountain pens which have a much smoother flow of ink than ballpoint pens.
- Bonnie Consolo was a woman born with no arms whose story dignity should inspire us all.

The Four Troublemakers: Including, Such As, Especially, and For Example

For some reason, there are four words/phrases that get people into ALL kinds of fragment trouble: including, such as, especially, and for example.

Incorrect: I love any holiday where food is highlighted. **Including** Halloween, Thanksgiving, and July Fourth.

Correct: I love any holiday where food is highlighted, **including** Halloween, Thanksgiving, and July Fourth.

Incorrect: When going camping, you need to pack your items carefully. **Such as** a first aid kit and can opener.

Correct: When going camping, you need to pack your items carefully, **such as** a first aid kit and a can opener.

Incorrect: I love the singer/songwriters of the 70's. **Especially** Carole King and James Taylor.

Correct: I love the singer/songwriters of the 70's, **especially** Carole King and James Taylor.

Incorrect: Who knew that the English language could be so complicated? **For example**, sentence fragments?

Correct: Who knew that the English language could be so complicated, **for example**, sentence fragments?

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