



Sentence Fragments

Angela Gulick

What Is a Sentence Fragment?

Just as the word “fragment” means a piece or segment of something in our everyday language, a sentence fragment is a piece or segment of a sentence.

In other words, 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. Here’s a quick refresher from our “Sentence Structure Review: Run-on Sentences, Comma Splices and Fused Sentences” workshop. If you want more information, you can consult that workshop.

What Is a Sentence?

A complete sentence is made up of two or more parts:

1. **A subject** (who or what the sentence is about)
2. **A verb** (what the action is that is taking place)
3. **Sometimes a “completer;”** a word or phrase that finishes out a sentence and turns a group of words into a complete thought.

The next few slides show you some examples.

Sentence Examples

Here is an example: **Angela dropped.**

Subject: Who or what are we talking about? Who or what is the focus of the sentence?
Angela

Verb: What about this person? What is she doing? Angela **dropped.**

Completer: Angela dropped what? This sentence is not yet complete because we need to know what Angela dropped. A vase? A picture frame? A puppy?

Or, as one of my students said in class once, Angela dropped.....dead. That one made me laugh. And then it made me nervous. Anyway, this sentence needs something to finish the thought.

Angela dropped **an expensive music box.**

Angela dropped **a frozen turkey on her foot. (true: I'm accident prone)**

Angela dropped **\$75 on a new purse. (not a true story: I am cheap)**

Angela dropped **by the library to pick up the latest David Sedaris book.**

Sentence Examples

Here is another example:

The Wahlert High School choir performed.

Subject: Who or what are we talking about? Who or what is the focus of the sentence? **The Wahlert High School choir**

Verb: What about the choir? What is it doing? The Wahlert High School choir **performed.**

Completer: This is actually a complete sentence on its own. For example, you could see something like this in a newspaper review:

Last Friday night, audience members were in for a real treat. Soprano Amy Dolan sang a medley of swing band numbers backed by the Wahlert High School band. The Wahlert High School choir performed.

You could add additional information, such as the Wahlert High School performed **a tribute to Broadway musicals.** This additional information makes the sentence more specific, but the details aren't *necessary* to have a complete grammatical sentence.

Sentence Examples

You can mentally walk your way through a sentence asking these questions:

For Christmas this year, **my brother Steve wrapped up** a 50-pound bag of bird seed. **I laughed.**

Who or what is the sentence about? **my brother Steve**

What about Steve? What did Steve do? **wrapped up**

My brother Steve wrapped up what? **a 50-pound bag of bird seed**

>>>>You now have a complete thought.

Who or what is the sentence about? **I**

What about “I”? What did “I” do? **I laughed**

This is a complete thought, so nothing needs to be added. Again, additional information could be added to make the sentence more clear or detailed, but that information isn't necessary for a complete sentence.

I laughed at what a terrible job my brother did wrapping but am very grateful my birds will eat this winter.

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.



Fragments

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 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** has both a **subject** and a **verb**, but it doesn't express a complete thought. Rather, a dependent clause is like a railway car that hasn't been connected to your train engine. It's just sitting on the tracks all alone, and it ain't goin' nowhere.*

Dependent clauses can “connect” to sentences in three places: At the beginning of the sentence, in the middle of the sentence, and at the end of the sentence. Where this connection takes place is up to you – what matters is what you most want to emphasize in your writing. Let's look at some examples on the next few slides:

*Yeah, I know this is a grammatical error, but I have to cut loose once in a while ☺.

Dependent Clauses

A dependent clause is easy to spot because it generally begins with a dependent (also called subordinate) conjunction.

When trying to determine if you have a dependent clause or an independent clause, be on the lookout for these words and phrases; they are often used with dependent clauses.

Dependent or Subordinate Conjunctions			
after	although	as	as soon as
because	before	by the time	even if
even though	every time	if	in case
in the event that	just in case	now that	once
only if	since	since the first time	though
unless	until	when	whenever
whereas	whether or not	while	

Dependent Clauses

Here is an example of a dependent clause:

While **you were napping**.

In this case, we have a subject (**you**) and we have a verb (**were napping**). However, this dependent clause can't stand on its own; it begs the writer for more information. In the following sentences, "the cat had four kittens" is the independent clause or the "train engine" that we can connect the dependent clause or "railcar" to.

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.



Where were
you???

Dependent Clauses

Here is another example of a dependant clause:

Since the weather became so cold.

In this case, we have a subject **(weather)** and we have a verb **(became)**. However, this dependent clause can't stand on its own; it begs the writer for more information. In the following sentences, "Jasper hasn't been to the dog groomer" is the independent clause or the "train engine" that we can connect the dependent clause or "railcar" to.

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.



Dependent Clauses

One more quick example:

Because I love Lucky Charms.

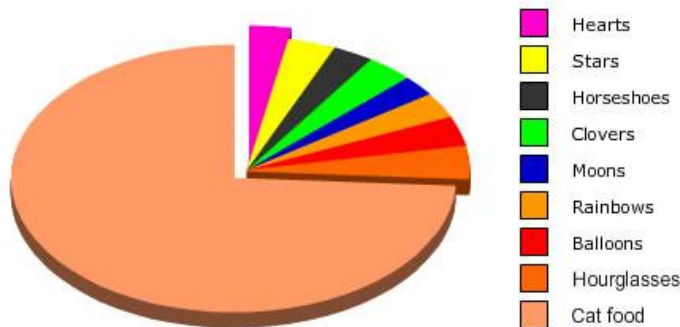
In this case, we have a subject (**I**) and we have a verb (**love**). However, this dependent clause can't stand on its own; it begs the writer for more information. In the following sentences, "I am always hopped up on sugar" is the independent clause or the "train engine" that we can connect the dependent clause or "railcar" to.

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.*

**Shapes in a box of
Lucky Charms**



***Plus, they're magically delicious.**

Dependent Clauses and Relative Pronouns

Another tricky group of words that can lead to fragments are 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 verbs 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 courage dignity, and ingenuity should inspire us all.

Read the words in red aloud. Do these sound like complete thoughts? These are actual railcars that need to be connected to **train engines.**

Let's look at the corrected versions.

Dependent Clauses and Relative Pronouns

Here are 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 of courage, dignity, and ingenuity should inspire us all.

If you would like to learn more about Bonnie Consolo, you might like to select this link:

[Information about Bonnie Consolo](#)

Some Final Reminders

For some reason, there are four words/phrases that get people into ALL kinds of fragment trouble. If you can commit these four to memory and pay attention to when you use them, you will cut out a lot of fragments:

such as

especially

including

for
example

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

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

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: **Including driving to Peoria and hosting a bridal shower.** I have a crazy weekend planned.

Correct: **Including** driving to Peoria and hosting a bridal shower, I have a crazy weekend planned.

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.