



THE SENTENCE FRAGMENT

Many beginning writers have trouble with sentence fragments cropping up in their writing. Fragments **do not** make a complete statement, and so they usually confuse or distract the reader. In addition, they are among the most serious grammatical errors instructors mark on student essays. In order to communicate your thoughts clearly and correctly, you must avoid writing sentence fragments.

To test for fragments, ask these three questions about sentence completeness:

1. Is there a verb?
2. Is there a subject?
3. Does the group of words make a complete statement?

1. Fragment caused by a missing verb: A VERB expresses action, existence, or occurrence and can always be put into the past tense, usually with an –ed ending:

Today I dance. Yesterday I danced.

Each sentence must have a complete verb. The verb in one sentence cannot govern the next sentence. The verb **must actually appear** in the sentence.

A verb is **not** complete if

- (a) it has an -ing ending without a helping verb

Fragment: *Charles studying geology and rock formations.*

Corrected: *Charles **is studying** geology and rock formations.*

- (b) it is an infinitive (“to” + a verb: to study, to speak, to skate)

Fragment: *Tanya to speak at a Rotary Club luncheon.*

Corrected: *Tanya **will speak** at a Rotary Club luncheon.*

2. Fragment caused by a missing subject: The SUBJECT is the noun or pronoun about which something is said. To find the subject of a sentence, first find the complete verb. Then ask, “Who or what is doing the action?”

The partygoers danced the Pennsylvania Polka.

The verb is *danced*. Who or what danced? The partygoers danced.

Therefore, *the partygoers* is the subject of the sentence.

In a command sentence the subject is usually not mentioned, but it is implied as *you*.

Hurry up!

Who should hurry up? You.

Set the table!

Who should set the table? You. Therefore, *you* is the subject.

Remember that a word group may also be the subject of a sentence.

Buying a new car costs a bundle.

To find the subject, first find the verb and then ask the subject question.

Who or what *costs* a bundle? Buying a new car. Therefore, the word group *buying a new car* is the subject of this sentence.

You may sometimes forget to include the subject of a sentence because you used it in the preceding sentence and because it obviously seems to be the subject of the fragment. Remember that the subject **must be** included in **each** sentence (except for a command sentence in which *you* is the understood/implied subject).

The skater glided across the ice. Did a full axel and ended with a triple jump.

The first statement is a complete sentence; the second is a fragment because it has no subject. Who did a full axel and a triple jump? The fragment does not tell us.

You can correct this error in two ways:

(a) Connect the fragment to the preceding sentence.

The skater glided across the ice, did a full axel and ended with a triple jump.

(b) Add a subject to the fragment.

The skater glided across the ice. She did a full axel and ended with a triple jump.

3. Fragment caused by a dependent word: If the verb and its subject are introduced by a DEPENDENT WORD, you have written a dependent clause, not a complete sentence. It does not express a complete thought.

Maria likes Meramec very much. (sentence with 5 words)

Because Maria likes Meramec very much. (fragment with 6 words)

Sergei studied feverishly. (sentence with 3 words)

While Sergei studied feverishly. (fragment with 4 words)

Because most of us think that “more is better,” it’s confusing for students to grasp the concept shown by the sentences above. Notice that the complete sentence about Maria has five words. Adding a dependent word does more than simply increase the word count from five words to six. It creates a sentence fragment. *How can adding just one more word to a sentence turn it into a fragment?*

The introductory DEPENDENT WORD

(a) creates a dependent clause—which can’t stand alone—and

(b) changes the sample sentence into a fragment which fails question three of the sentence completeness test. The clause “because Maria likes Meramec very much” **does** have a subject and a verb, but it **doesn’t** make a complete statement.

What happened or will happen because Maria likes Meramec very much?

Because Maria likes Meramec very much, she joined the Student Council.

What happened while Sergei studied feverishly?

While Sergei studied feverishly, he forgot to eat lunch.

Both these dependent-clause fragments need an independent clause to complete the thought begun in the first part of the sentence.

DEPENDENT WORDS

after	since	where
although	so	whereas
as	so that	whenever
as if	than	whether
because	that	which
before	though	whichever
even if	unless	while
even though	until	who
ever since	what	whom
how	whatever	whomever
if	when	whose
in order that	whenever	why

To correct a fragment caused by a DEPENDENT WORD:

- Complete the fragment with the necessary words.
The building which was badly damaged.
The building which was badly damaged has been torn down.
- Omit the dependent word, rewriting the sentence without it.
The building which was badly damaged.
The building was badly damaged.
- Attach the fragment to the previous sentence or to the one that follows, whichever is more closely connected in thought to the fragment.
The wreckers tore down the eyesore. The building which was badly damaged.
The wreckers tore down the eyesore, the building which was badly damaged.