Sentence Fragments

**Sentence fragments** occur when a sentence lacks a subject and/or complete verb, or consists entirely of a subordinate clause. Though sentence fragments can be used in genres like creative writing and advertising for emphasis or stylistic purposes, in formal academic writing fragments can **undermine your authority** and **distract your reader**. But don't mistake a sentence that's simply short for a fragment; a sentence like “I do” is correct because it has both a subject (main noun) and a complete verb.

Fix sentence fragments by **adding** missing elements, by **incorporating** the fragment into adjoining sentences, or by **dropping** the subordinating conjunction.

**How to Spot Sentence Fragments**

1. **Find the main verb in your sentence.** Remember that just because your sentence has a verb, that doesn't necessarily mean it has a *main* verb. Watch out especially for verb forms that require a helping verb. (Sentences lacking a main verb will often sound incomplete when read aloud.)

   **FRAG** The professor *waiting* all morning for the bus.
   **SENT** The professor, *waiting* all morning for the bus, *grew* impatient.
   **SENT** The professor *was waiting* all morning for the bus.

2. **Find the subject of your sentence.** Just because your sentence has a noun, that doesn't necessarily mean it has a *subject* noun. Conversely, your subject might also be a pronoun or a gerund (a verb ending in “ing” that functions as a noun) and may not look like a noun at all. Always ask yourself who/what does, or who/what is, in the sentence. If you can't answer those questions, you've most likely got a fragment.

   **FRAG** The dinosaur magnet fell off the refrigerator. *And hit the floor.*
   **SENT** The dinosaur magnet fell off the refrigerator and hit the floor.

3. **Find the main clause of your sentence.** If the sentence cannot stand alone and still make sense, it may be a subordinate clause. Subordinate clauses can be tricky because they often do have a subject noun and a main verb. What they lack is a complete idea. They need to be connected to a main clause to be completed. Ask yourself if this sentence can stand alone and still make sense.

   **FRAG** I will be there whenever you are in trouble. *Because* you are my friend.
   **SENT** I will be there whenever you are in trouble because you are my friend.
Grammar Interlude

Subordinating Conjunctions
If you're still unsure about whether or not your clause is subordinate, look to see if it begins with one of these subordinating conjunctions. (If it does, you'll need a main clause to complete the sentence):

- after
- although
- as
- because
- if
- once
- since
- that
- unless
- until
- when
- where
- whereas
- whose
- whichever
- when
- whereas
- whoever
- while
- whomever

Fixing Sentence Fragments

1. **Add the missing element** if your sentence is missing a subject (main noun) or a main verb. Remember to look for missing helping verbs and to account for gerunds as potential subjects.

   **FRAG**  
   Living by the sea with her packs of dogs and llamas.

   **SENT**  
   Living by the sea with her packs of dogs and llamas has long been her dream.

2. **Incorporate the fragment into an adjoining sentence.** Quite often fragments can be built into surrounding sentences, particularly when the fragment is a subordinate clause.

   **FRAG**  
   Handouts can be helpful. When full of examples.

   **SENT**  
   Handouts, when full of examples, can be helpful.

3. **Drop the subordinating word.** Sometimes you can simply drop the subordinating conjunction (see the list above), leaving you with a main clause that is not dependent on a second clause to complete the action/sentence.

   **FRAG**  
   Because he did not stop to play. He missed the joke.

   **SENT**  
   He did not stop to play. He missed the joke.

Revision Checklist

- Underline the main verb. Does it require a helping verb?
- Underline your subject. Ask who/what does or who/what is.
- Underline subordinating words. Is there a main clause that completes the sentence?
Where in *The Bedford Handbook*?

Section 19: Sentence Fragments