THE UNIVERSITY OF
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AUSTRALIA

Academic Writing Skills
Sentence Structure

Learning
Development
CENTRE FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

Sentence Structure

Formal English sentences have three basic structures: simple, compound and complex. Creative or journalistic writing often breaks the formal structures for expressive reasons, but academic writing retains correct formal structures.

The following is an overview of these 3 sentence structures. As such, it is only a summary 'map' of the whole territory. For full explanations, refer to the recommended resources on p.8.

NB: sentence examples in this handout are coded in blue font. In many of the sentence examples, the subject is underlined, **the verb** of that subject is in bold.

SIMPLE SENTENCE

A simple sentence contains one **Independent Clause (IC).**

The clause consists of 1 subject + 1 **verb** which can stand *independently* as a sentence:

> *The student **learned**.*

In any clause, the verb must be a **complete, finite verb.** To find it, look for the *main action* of the sentence:

> *Reading the chapter with much interest, the student **learned** more about quality teaching.*

> *Expanding parent involvement in schools **has become** a regular theme in policy initiatives, requests for grant proposals, and school reform efforts in the United States.*

(In these sentences, 'reading' and 'expanding' are not functioning as complete, finite verbs. 'Reading' is functioning as a *participle*, while 'expanding' is functioning as a *gerund* – but enough grammar-talk! To understand more about verbs, and these other functions, see Belmont & Sharkey, chapters 1-4, & 8.)

Common error 1: fragment

A fragment usually occurs when the 'sentence' is all subject or object or other information (i.e. all nouns or noun phrases or 'things') with no **verb**:

> *Expanding parent involvement, a regular theme in policy initiatives.*
>   [verb needed between these two 'things']

> *Several variables **exist**. The behaviour of staff for example.*
> [This 1st one is a sentence, but the 2nd is not.]

These errors happen mostly when we write as we speak (an aural medium), but formal written language (a visual medium). It requires the relationship of subject & verb to be clearly marked.

If there is **no verb**, there is **no clause**; therefore a sentence cannot exist.

Common error 2: misplaced modifier

A clear understanding of subject and verb will help you avoid this error:

*Frogs **are** a hazard in the wet season. Driving home one night, hundreds of them **were** **blocking** the road.*

The 1st sentence is good; the 2nd begins with a phrase whose function is to add information about the subject – but the subject is 'hundreds of [frogs]'. Frogs can't drive. The sentence should be:

*Driving home one night, we **counted** hundreds of them blocking the road.*

EXTRA: subject – verb – object

The verb is often followed by an object, which, like the subject, is a 'thing' (i.e. a noun). This 'thing' is a direct recipient of the action performed by the verb:

*The student **read** the first chapter.*

*Marine organisms **are** a prolific source of biologically active secondary metabolites.*

This is the typical English structure of subject-verb-object (NB: noun + verb + noun).

Hint: an object is the answer to the question of 'what?' after the verb, e.g.:
Q: 'The student read…what?' A: 'the first chapter'.
Q; 'Marine organisms are… what?" A: a prolific source of…' etc

While all sentences *must have* a subject and a verb, they don't always have an object. This is because some verbs don't need one:

*The student **slept.***

…and it would be illogical to give them one: *The student **slept** dark room.*

We can add all kinds of other information about the verb, often to do with where, when, how or for whom the action was done. This information may include 'things' (nouns), but those things are not directly acted upon by the verb:

*The student **slept** in a dark room.*	[where the action occurred]
*The student **slept** for eight hours.*	[when the action occurred]
*The student **read** widely.*	[how the action occurred]
*The student **read** to her sister.*	[the action directed 'to' another]

…OR, the extra information after the verb may be doing something else entirely, e.g. in this example, it is further defining the subject:

*The behaviour of staff **is frequently ignored** as a variable*

COMPOUND SENTENCE

When one **Independent Clause (IC)** is joined to another **Independent Clause (IC)**, a 'compound' of two equal elements is formed. In a compound sentence, the clauses can be joined in three different ways. Note the position of the comma and the semi-colon in each example:

(1):   **IC, + IC**   (clause – comma – co-ordinating conjunction – clause)

> *Later born children* **produce** *more personal pronouns,* and *they* **develop** *more advanced conversational skills than the first-born child.*

(2):   **IC; +, IC**   (clause – semi-colon – adverbial conjunction – comma – clause)

> *The Orient* **is** *an idea with a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that have reality and presence in and for the West;* consequently, *the two geographical entities* **support** *and reflect each other.*

> *Every organisation* **develops** *a system of shared values;* however, *this shared culture* **can restrict** *the creative individual thinking of employees.*

NB: it is increasingly common for the semi-colon to be replaced by a full-stop, thereby creating 2 separate sentences, e.g.:

> *Every organisation* **develops** *a system of shared values.* However, *this shared culture* **can restrict** *the creative individual thinking of employees.*

(3):   **IC; IC**   (clause – semi-colon – clause)

> *Glasgow was the second city to have an underground railway system; London was the first.*

> *No other 'yes' can be heard from the unconscious; there is no such thing as an unconscious 'no'.*

Common error: comma splice
This occurs when a comma is used instead of the co-ordinating conjunction, adverbial conjunction, or semi-colon:

> *Later born children* **produce** *more personal pronouns,* they **develop** *more advanced conversational skills than the first-born child.*

> *Every organisation* **develops** *a system of shared values,* this shared culture **can restrict** *the creative individual thinking of employees.*

> *Glasgow was the second city in the world to have an underground railway system, London was the first.*

COMPLEX SENTENCE

When an **Independent Clause (IC)** is joined by a **Dependent Clause (DC)** or a **Relative Clause (RC)**, a 'complex' sentence is formed. It is 'complex' because the meaning of the additional clause is dependent on, or relative to, the independent clause. Consequently, dependent and relative clauses cannot stand alone as sentences.

(1): Subordination: an additional clause *depends on* the independent clause for meaning

IC + DC   (Ind. Clause – sub-ordinating conjunction – Dep. Clause)

We ***will make*** *a new world* *if* *no love* ***exists*** *in this one.*

Art history ***has frequently been criticized*** *for its subjectivity* *because* *the definition of what is beautiful* ***varies*** *from individual to individual.*

OR

+ DC, IC   (sub-ordinating conjunction – Dep. Clause – comma – Ind. Clause)
The order of the clauses is reversed, and this is indicated by a comma.

If *no love* ***exists*** *in this world,* *we* ***will make*** *a new one.*

Because *the definition of what is beautiful* ***varies*** *from individual to individual,* *art history* ***has frequently been criticized*** *for its subjectivity.*

(2): Relativity: an additional clause is *relative to* an independent or dependent clause

A **Relative Clause** always begins with a relative pronoun – who, which or that. A relative pronoun comes immediately after a noun, which is usually the object noun of a clause, so it 'represents' that object noun:

This ***is*** *the girl* *who* ***lives*** *next door.* *She* ***is learning*** *to speak Greek,* *which* ***sounds*** *different to English, so* *she* ***downloaded*** *an app* *that* ***explains*** *the pronunciation.*

NB: because the pronouns who, which and that are representing the noun (the 'thing'), they are therefore the subject of the relative clause:

…who ***lives*** *next door*   ['who' means 'the girl']

…which ***sounds*** *different*   ['which' means 'Greek']

…that ***explains*** *the pronunciation*   ['that' means 'an app']

There are 2 types of relative clause: *restrictive* and *non-restrictive*.

A *restrictive relative clause* is essential to the meaning of the main idea, and is therefore not set off by a comma:

IC rp & RC   (Ind. Clause – rel. pronoun & Rel. Clause):

This section will review the literature that summarizes progress in construction simulation.

In modern times, art history has emerged as a discipline that teaches people how to evaluate and interpret works of art

The Royal Commission into the banking sector has revealed unethical and criminal behaviour that must be prosecuted.

A *non-restrictive relative clause* adds information that is not essential to the main idea, and is either inserted between subject & verb of the Independent Clause, or added to the end of the Independent Clause.

In either case, a non-restrictive relative clause is set off by a comma, or commas:

s, rp & RC, v & IC
(subject – comma – rel. pronoun & Rel. Clause – comma – verb & rest of Ind. Clause):

*Art history, which has emerged as a discipline in modern times, **teaches** people how to evaluate and interpret works of art.*

*This section, which reviews the literature on construction simulation, **argues** that simulation has progressed exponentially in the last decade.*

IC, rp & RC   (Ind. Clause – comma – rel. pronoun & Rel. Clause):

*The Royal Commission into the banking sector **has revealed** unethical and criminal behaviour, which is no surprise to customers.*

Common error 1: fragments

This occurs when the Dependent Clause is used as a stand-alone sentence:

If there is no love in the world.

Because the definition of what is beautiful varies from individual to individual.

…or when a Relative Clause is written as a separate sentence:

Art history teaches people how to evaluate and interpret works of art. Which raises the question of subjectivity.

(You may see this in journalistic writing, but it is not formal academic writing.)

Hint: you could not say these fragments out of context to someone and expect to be understood. I these examples, the words "if", "because" and "which" tell us there is more information needed (i.e. an independent clause) to complete the thought.

Common error 2: comma splices

When clauses are joined without a subordinating conjunction:

*Art history **has frequently been criticized** for its subjectivity, the definition of what is beautiful **varies** from individual to individual.*

*We **will make** a new world, no love **exists** in this one.*
(You might see this in *creative* writing, but it is not structurally correct.)

…or without a relative pronoun:

Art history teaches people how to evaluate and interpret works of art, this raises the question of subjectivity.

*This **is** the girl who lives next door, she **is learning** to speak Greek.*

COMPOUND-COMPLEX SENTENCE

Many sentences combine compound and complex structures. Here are two examples:

(1): *If no love exists in this world, we will make a new world, and we will give it walls, and give it a knocker that resonates like a diamond falling to a jeweller's felt.*

Here are the separate clauses, with <u>subject</u>, **verb** and <mark>conjunctions/rel. pronouns</mark> marked:

> *<mark>If</mark> <u>no love</u> **exists** in this world,*
>> [Dep. Clause]

> *<u>we</u> **will make** a new world, <mark>and</mark> <u>we</u> **will give** it walls, <mark>and</mark> **give** it a knocker*
>> [compound of 3 Ind. Clauses, the third with the subject 'we' understood]

> *<mark>that</mark> **resonates** like a diamond falling to a jeweller's felt.*
>> [Rel. Clause]

(2): *The few observational studies that have been done have shown fairly consistent patterns of activities, although they used different methodologies and subject populations.*

Here are the separate clauses, with <u>subject</u>, **verb** and <mark>conjunctions</mark> marked:

> *<u>The few observational studies</u> [….] **have shown** fairly consistent patterns of activities,*
>> [Ind. Clause]

> *<mark>that</mark> **have been done***
>> [Rel. Clause inserted between subject & verb of Ind. Clause]

> *<mark>although</mark> <u>they</u> **used** different methodologies and subject populations.*
>> [Dep. Clause]

FINALLY…

The purpose of this guide is to help you identify these basic structures in your sentences. However, much of your writing will include additional aspects of grammar and usage. There is always more to know about sentences. To help, we recommend resources such as:

Belmont, W. & Sharkey, M. (2009). *The easy writer: formal writing for academic purposes* (3rd ed.). Frenchs Forest NSW: Pearson Longman

Lauchman, R. (2010). *Punctuation at work: simple principles for achieving clarity and style.* New York: Amacom.

Williams, J. M. & Colomb, G. G. (2010). *Style: lessons in clarity and grace* (10th ed.). New York: Pearson Longman.

And of course we suggest that you go to the Learning Development Blackboard for detailed resources about Academic English language.

HANDY LISTS OF CONJUNCTIONS

Co-ordinating conjunctions

To express	Use this conjunction
Addition	*and*
Addition when the 1st clause is negative	*nor*
Contrast	*but, yet*
Explanation	*for*
Alternative	*or*
When the 2nd clause introduces a result	*so*

Adverbial conjunctions

To express	Use one of these conjunctions
Addition	*in addition, also, besides, furthermore, moreover*
Contrast	*however, on the contrary, nevertheless, nonetheless*
Alternative	*instead, on the other hand, otherwise*
Result	*accordingly, as a result, consequently, hence, therefore, thus*
Likeness	*likewise, similarly*
Emphasis	*in effect, in fact, indeed*
Clarification	*that is, in other words*
To give an example	*for example, for instance,*
To show time	*at the same time, finally, in the meantime, meanwhile, next, then, thereafter, while, simultaneously*

Subordinating conjunctions

To express	Use one of these conjunctions
Condition	*if, even if, as long as, provided that, unless*
Contrast	*although, even though*
Cause	*because, since*
Time	*after, before, when, whenever, while, until*
Place	*where, wherever*
Purpose	*in order that, so that*

Source: Belmont, W. & Sharkey, M. (2009). *The easy writer: formal writing for academic purposes* (3rd ed.). Frenchs Forest NSW: Pearson Education Australia.