

ACADEMIC LEARNING SUPPORT



Sentence Structure

A Guide

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Sentence Structures

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

This guide provides an introductory 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 p9.

NB: sentence examples in this handout are presented in **blue font**. In many of the sentence examples, **the subject** is underlined, and **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: 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**:

Expansion of parent involvement, a regular theme in policy initiatives.
[A verb is needed between the two 'things'.]

*Several variables **exist**. The behaviour of staff for example.*
[The 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) 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: 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 a dark room.*

We can add all kinds of **other information** about the verb by using modifying phrases or words which are *not direct* objects of the verb:

<i><u>The student</u> slept in a dark room.</i>	[prepositional phrase of place]
<i><u>The student</u> slept for eight hours.</i>	[prepositional phrase of time]
<i><u>The student</u> slept soundly.</i>	[adverb modifying the verb]
<i><u>The student</u> slept like a baby.</i>	[prepositional phrase of similarity]

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, so it 'represents' that noun:

*The girl **who** lives next door **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 therefore a kind of noun (i.e. 'thing'), they function as the subject of the relative clause:

*...**who** **lives** next door* ['who' meaning 'the girl']

*...**which** **sounds** different* ['which' meaning 'Greek']

*...**that** **explains** the pronunciation* ['that' meaning 'an app']

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

A **restrictive relative clause** is essential to the main thought of the sentence, and is therefore *not* set apart 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.*

In each of these examples, removing the relative clause would remove the most important idea of the sentence.

A **non-restrictive relative clause** is *not* essential to the main thought of the sentence, but is inserted or added as extra information, and set apart 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.*

In each of these examples, the relative clause could be removed from the sentence without impacting the main thought of the sentence.

Common error: sentence fragment

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 some 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. In these examples, the words 'if', 'because' and 'which' tell us that more information (i.e. an independent clause) is coming to complete the thought.

Common error: comma splice

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 subject, **verb** and **conjunctions/rel. pronouns** marked:

If no love **exists** in this world,
[Dep. Clause]

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

that **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 subject, **verb** and **conjunctions** marked:

The few observational studies [...] **have shown** fairly consistent patterns of activities,
[Ind. Clause]

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

although they **used** different methodologies and subject populations.
[Dep. Clause]

Finally...

The purpose of this guide is to help you identify basic structures you might use in your sentences. However, much of your writing will include additional aspects of grammar and usage. There is always so much 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* (2nd ed.). Pearson Longman.

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

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

And we suggest that you go to the [Academic Learning Support](#) web page for detailed resources about Academic English language.

Handy List of Conjunctions

Co-ordinating conjunctions

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

Adverbial conjunctions

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

Subordinating conjunctions

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

Source: Belmont, W. & Sharkey, M. (2009).
The easy writer: formal writing for academic purposes (2nd ed.).
 Frenchs Forest NSW: Pearson Education Australia.