



1: How to write a sentence

Academic writing should almost all be in sentences – non-sentences are a very common mistake. Basically, a sentence is a topic + a statement about that topic. For instance, in

Numerical aptitude is influenced by the right hemisphere.

- the topic (called the “subject”) is “Numerical aptitude”. Every sentence must have a subject, usually near the beginning. If it doesn’t have a subject – if it isn’t about something – then it’s not a sentence.
- the statement about the subject (called the “predicate”) is “is influenced by the right hemisphere”. If it doesn’t have a predicate – if it isn’t telling you something about the subject – then it’s not a sentence.

My time so far and the time ahead very much has a purpose and a reason.
To learn, to experience and to enjoy all that the university has to offer.

is easy to understand but isn’t academically acceptable. The first part’s fine (subject = “My time so far and the time ahead”; predicate = “very much has a purpose and a reason”), but the second part’s not a sentence (subject = ... well, there isn’t one). You can write it with both parts as

My time so far and the time ahead has a definite purpose. This is to learn, to experience and to enjoy all that the university has to offer.

My time so far and the time ahead has a definite purpose, which is to learn, to experience and to enjoy all that the university has to offer.

My time so far and the time ahead has a definite purpose: to learn, to experience and to enjoy all that the university has to offer.

As you can see, any idea can be expressed in several different ways, and your writing style depends on how you choose between them. In general, choose the clearest, simplest (while still getting your meaning across) and most pleasant to read.

To write a good sentence, always start by thinking about

- your **subject** (what do you want your reader to know more about?)
- and
- your **predicate** (what do you want your reader to learn about the subject?)

then expand them, adding any necessary detail.

My time so far and the time ahead has a definite purpose. This is to learn, to experience and to enjoy all that the university has to offer.

For instance, this text has a few grammatical problems – before looking at my comments, see how many you can find yourself.

Throughout our whole life, we have influences acting upon us, which form our values, personality and perceptions that are what makes us behaviour the way we do. Firstly, society and culture; these are the values, customs, etc, shared between the members of the society in which we belong...

- The sentence “Firstly...” doesn’t have a subject and predicate. From the writer’s argument, we can assume the subject’s “The first influence” and the predicate’s “society and culture”. These two things are being matched, so the writer needs “is” to make the connection.
- The sentence “Throughout...” has a subject (“we”) and a predicate (“have influences”), so it’s certainly a sentence. In academic writing, though, you avoid “I” and “we” unless you have a good reason for them. A sentence’s subject grabs the reader’s attention, so “we” as the subject sounds especially unacademic.
- Both sentences are more than just subject + predicate; both have extra information to make them more useful (“which form our values...”, “that are what make us...”, “in which we belong...”). That’s good, but you can add information in different ways, and all three of those use the same pattern (“which”... “that”... “which”...). To keep your writing pleasant and smooth, have some variety. Say each idea the best way *for that particular idea*.
- It also has a few small technical mistakes (e.g. “behaviour” instead of “behave”, “in which” instead of “to which”).

Using full proper sentences, the text works better as

Throughout life, people have influences which form their values, personalities and perceptions to make them behave the way they do. The main influence is culture, or the shared values and customs of the society to which they belong...

The great secret: Don’t start by thinking about the words; start by thinking about the meaning. Put the sentence together, starting with subject and predicate, around that central meaning.