

Identifying and Correcting Sentence Boundary Errors

Every complete sentence needs a *subject* and a *verb*.

In the sentence above, the *verb* is **needs**. A verb describes an *action* (e.g. **run, cry, devour**), a *state of being* (e.g. **be, appear, function**), or an *occurrence* (e.g. **become**).

The subject of a sentence is whoever or whatever does the verb. A subject can be a person, an object, a pronoun, or an abstract concept. For example, the subject can be a **person** who *runs*, several **people** who *cry*, or a **group** of lions that *devour* an antelope. The subject can be **cities** that *are* popular, a **situation** that *appears* to be getting out of hand, or a **pronoun** (like “it”) that *functions* in place of a noun. The subject can be **whoever** *becomes* the first person to live on Mars. The subject in that sentence at the top is **sentence** because it is the **sentence** that *needs* to have something in order to be complete.

A complete sentence can be as simple as two words, one subject and one verb: **She reads**.

In fact, a complete sentence only needs to be one word if that word is a command. When giving a command, the subject (“you”) is implied. For example: **Run!** is just a *verb*, but the *subject* (“you”) is implicit in the shouted command.

Sentence boundary errors are the grammatical errors that professors are most likely to notice and penalize. Sentence boundary errors occur when 1) a sentence is a **fragment** because it does not have enough information to be complete or when 2) a punctuated “sentence” is a **run-on** because it actually contains two or more sentence crammed together.

Sentence Fragments and Dependent Clauses

A **sentence fragment** is usually a “sentence” that is missing either a subject or a verb. Sometimes, however, the addition of one word can turn an otherwise complete sentence into a **dependent clause**. A dependent clause *depends upon* some other information (the **independent clause**) in order to have meaning. Because a dependent clause doesn’t convey a complete idea by itself, it is not a complete sentence.

Here are some examples of words that can make a complete sentence a dependent clause:

Who	While	If	Since
What	That	Where	Because
Unless	Although	When	After

I drink coffee would be a complete sentence. **I** is the *subject* and **drink** is the *verb*. (The word **coffee** is an *object*.) **Because I drink coffee** is not a complete sentence, however. It is a *dependent clause* that requires an explanation of what happens as a result of drinking coffee in order to be complete. **When I drink coffee** and **Unless I drink coffee** are likewise incomplete sentences. To complete the sentence, you must complete the thought: **Because I drink coffee, my teeth are not very white. When I drink coffee, I get jittery. Unless I drink coffee, I am sleepy all morning.**

Tests for Determining if a Sentence is Complete

Strategy #1: Transform the questionable sentence with a "tag question" at the end, such as *isn't it? didn't they?* or *wasn't he?* The tag question will call attention to just the subject and a simplified verb. If the transformation is easily possible, then the sentence is complete. If you're not sure how to add the tag question without including additional words, then the sentence is a fragment.

Sentence: Alejandra is a biophysicist.

Test: Alejandra is a biophysicist, *isn't she?*

Result: This is an easy transformation, so the sentence is complete.

Sentence: Enjoyed the baseball game on Saturday.

Test: Enjoyed the baseball game on Saturday, *didn't _____?*

Result: We're not sure who enjoyed it (e.g. you/they/she), so it's not complete.

Sentence: My math class in the morning.

Test: My math class in the morning, _____ *it?*

Result: We're not sure what's being said about the math class, so it's not complete.

Strategy #2: Insert the questionable sentence into a "nest sentence," such as "They refused to believe that _____." If the transformation is easy, then the sentence is complete.

Sentence: Doing math problems isn't one of Yiming's favorite activities.

Test: *They refused to believe that* doing math problems isn't one of Yiming's favorite activities.

Result: This makes sense, so the sentence is complete.

Sentence: The wind howling through the trees last night.

Test: *They refused to believe that* the wind [was] howling through the trees last night.

Result: We would have to add a verb like "was" in order for the sentence to make sense, so we can tell that the sentence is incomplete.

Sentence: If you started tomorrow at 3:00 p.m.

Test: *They refused to believe that* if you started tomorrow at 3:00 p.m., *then* _____.

Result: We're not sure what would happen as a result, so the sentence is not complete.

Can you tell which of the following are complete sentences?

To end this war.

Callie likes to spin on the plastic wheel.

You saw the game last night.

Walked all over town and still couldn't find it.

Get out!

Milk, eggs, and probably some bread, too.

Because winter is coming.

Run-On Sentences

A **run-on sentence** is a sentence that combines two or more complete sentences in a faulty way. A run-on sentence usually has missing or inappropriate punctuation. When a comma has been incorrectly used to combine two sentences, this is called a **comma splice**. Keep in mind, however, that a sentence can be very long and still be grammatically correct if it is punctuated correctly.

Here are two complete sentences that have two subjects and two verbs:

Kyle and Maria dine and dash every weekend.
Kyle likes romance movies, but Maria prefers horror films.

However, here's a run-on sentence that *seems* like it only has one subject and one verb:

I like romance movies, I like horror movies.

Because the *subject* (**I**) and the verb (**like**) are both repeated, this sentence technically has *two* subjects and *two* verbs, even though they're the same. Even though the ideas are very closely related, these are two separate sentences that have not been combined in a grammatically correct way. This can be fixed in several ways.

- 1.) You can make two separate sentences by changing that comma to a period: **I like romance movies. I like horror movies.** That's the easiest fix, but it sometimes creates language that is choppy and repetitive.
- 2.) You can change the comma to a semicolon (;), which is the punctuation mark used to combine two independent but closely related sentences: **I like romance movies; I like horror movies.** Using too many semicolons for no good reason can look weird, though.
- 3.) You can add a *coordinating conjunction* (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) between the two sentences: **I like romance movies, and I like horror movies.** The conjunction you choose will depend on the point you're trying to get across. **I like romance movies, yet I like horror movies** implies something different from **I like romance movies, so I like horror movies.**
- 4.) You can also revise the sentence so that you're not repeating the subject and verb: **I like romance and horror movies.**

Test for Determining if a Sentence is a Run-On

Make up a "yes/no" question about the questionable sentence—that is, either put "do/did" in front of the sentence or move "is/was" to the front. An acceptable sentence will yield one yes/no question. Run-on sentences or comma splices will create two or more yes/no questions.

Sentence: Mu'awiyah was the first ruler of the Umayyad Caliphate he was born in 602, he ruled from 661-680.

Test: (1) Was Mu'awiyah the first ruler of the Umayyad Caliphate? (2) Was he born in 602? (3) Did he rule from 661-680?

Result: This sentence is a run-on because it requires three distinct yes/no questions.

Exercise: Identifying and Correcting Sentence Boundary Errors

Read the following sentences closely. If the sentence is grammatically complete, do nothing. If the sentence is a fragment, add words or phrases to make it complete. If the sentence is a run-on, rewrite it so that it is grammatically correct using one of the four methods described on the previous page. Try to use each of the four methods at least once.

- 1.) Eli Clare wrote about climbing mountains, I have never tried to climb a mountain.

- 2.) Jessica is always sending me texts in the middle of the night I told her not to do that because it wakes me up.

- 3.) Although I enjoy watching *Game of Thrones*, I think its story has a lot of problems.

- 4.) Rashad woke up at ten, he went downstairs, he was looking for his cell phone charger when he found the dead mouse.

- 5.) I always try to bring extra cookies to the party, yet for some reason I never bring enough.

- 6.) She is awful, she always complains about every little thing.

- 7.) The most important thing about writing.

- 8.) I think it's important to be kind to your neighbors, you might need their help in an emergency some day plus it just feels good to be friendly with people.

- 9.) His argument is absurd because he does not explain what spaghetti has to do with crime statistics also all of his evidence comes from the website mafiapasta.com, which is very biased.

- 10.) If he shows up tomorrow night.