



OWLS Writing Guides: SENTENCE FRAGMENTS

A sentence is a group of words that contains a subject and a complete verb, and expresses a complete thought. **A sentence fragment** is a word or word group punctuated as a sentence but lacking a subject or a complete verb, or not expressing a complete thought.

Fragment lacking a subject:

Dropped the book after hearing a loud explosion.

Fragment lacking all or part of a verb:

The Walking Dead, one of the most popular shows on television.

Sea glass found on the beaches in New England.

Fragment lacking a complete thought:

As long as you don't bring him to dinner.

Fragments commonly occur in writing when you use the following constructions:

1. Dependent clauses/relative clauses:

Even if the word group contains a subject and a complete verb, check that it is not a **dependent (subordinate) clause**. Look for word groups beginning with a subordinating word (*although, because, if, when, while, etc.*) or with a relative pronoun (*who, whom, which, that*). This type of clause must be attached to an independent clause.

Fragment: Because the levees broke.

Sentence: Because the levees broke, nearly 80% of the city flooded.

Fragment: Jody, who came to the lecture late.

Sentence: Jody, who came to the lecture late, fell asleep in the front row.

2. Verb phrases: Verbal phrases function as modifiers in a sentence, not as verbs expressing a complete action.

Participle phrase starting with an *-ing* verb: Running up the hill.

Participle phrase starting with an *-ed* verb: Disappointed by the news.

Infinitive phrase starting with a *to* verb: To keep the inmates happy.

Even when paired with a subject, the result is a fragment. To make a complete sentence, words must be added to the phrase to create a complete sentence.

Fragment: The man running up the hill.

Sentence: The man running up the hill just escaped from the local jail.

Or the verbal must be changed into a complete verb (one that expresses a complete action) by adding a helping verb:

Fragment: The man running up the hill.

Sentence: The man is running up the hill.

3. Prepositional phrases:

A prepositional phrase can never be the sentence subject or contain the sentence subject or main verb. Prepositional phrases need to be connected to independent clauses. Alone, they are fragments.

Fragment: After coming home to find everything ruined.

Sentence: After coming home to find everything ruined, we sat down and had a beer.

Sentence: After coming home, we found that everything was ruined.

4. Explanatory phrases (*for example, such as, that is*): This kind of fragment can be fixed by adding the explanatory phrase to the independent clause that it modifies.

Fragment: She came home from the Mardi Gras parade with lots of throws. Such as beads, cups, doubloons, and stuffed toys.

Sentence: She came home from the Mardi Gras parade with lots of throws, such as beads, cups, doubloons, and stuffed toys.

5. Appositives:

An appositive is a word or phrase that renames the subject or some other noun in the sentence. It cannot stand alone as a sentence.

Fragment: The person I admire most is my father. A true hero.

Sentence: The person I admire most is my father, a true hero.

6. Verbs that require an object or complement:

Even if the word group contains a subject and a complete verb, the verb might need other words to form a complete thought. A common example is a word group that contains a transitive verb but omits the verb's object, or one that contains a linking verb but omits the word(s) that complete the sense of the verb.

I sent. (What did you send?)

The soup tastes. (How does it taste?)

He seems. (He seems how?)

She is. (She is what?)

Grammatically, the verb is lacking its object or complement. Add word(s) to complete the thought.

I sent the package

The soup tastes delicious.

He seems like a nice person.

She is tall.