

# Incomplete Sentences

## *A Skill Sheet*

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Incomplete sentences can be a problem for young writers. An incomplete sentence may be defined as *any word or group of words that creates the subject of a sentence, but fails to create a predicate*. An example will help explain.

**The brown dog with a bushy tail ran through the woods.**

In the sentence above, the *complete subject* is “The brown dog with a bushy tail.” The subject is *complete* in that it includes all the words that describe the word “dog,” which is what we would call the *simple subject*.

The rest of the sentence, “**ran through the woods,**” is the *predicate*. A predicate is the section of the sentence that describes the action taken by the *subject*. You can usually identify the *predicate* by asking yourself what the *subject* of the sentence did, like this: “**What did the brown dog with a bushy tail do? He ran through the woods.**”

If we were to create an incomplete sentence out of “The brown dog with a bushy tail ran through the woods,” all we’d have to do is eliminate the *predicate*, like this:

**The brown dog with a bushy tail.**

But because the definition of an incomplete sentence is *any word or group of words that creates the subject of a sentence, but fails to create a predicate*, we might also come up with one of the following:

**Brown dog.**

**The brown dog.**

**The brown dog with a bushy tail.**

Note that neither “**The brown dog with**” nor “**The brown dog with a**” are considered incomplete sentences. The reason for this is that neither of them form a *complete subject*; no native speaker of English would ever create such a construction, for it would defy even the simplest rules of language.

### Explanation of the Problem:

In order to understand where incomplete sentences come from, we must first understand what incomplete sentences truly are. An incomplete sentence - in addition to being the *subject* or *complete subject* of a sentence - is a single, complete, individual image in the reader or writer’s mind.

The significance of that last statement cannot be recognized until we couple it with the fact that our mind thinks in terms of single, complete, individual images. Thought processes may not be broken down into neat, tidy sentences complete with capital letters and periods, but they *are* broken down into a series of constantly moving *images*. The only way to interpret the constantly moving stream is to break it down into single, complete, individual images. It is perfectly acceptable, for instance, to visualize “**A brown dog with a bushy tail,**” or a simple “**brown dog.**” The mind has no problem understanding these concepts. Try envisioning “**a brown,**” however, and you’ll find yourself at a loss.

The problem arises when individual, complete images are written down without a predicate. If, on a piece of paper, you were to see the words “**A brown dog**” followed by a period, your mind would immediately ask a series of question, such as, “What about **a brown dog?**” or “What’s the point of this? I understand that there’s **a brown dog,** but what’s it *doing?*”

Communication demands complete thoughts. If you walk up to someone and attempt to introduce yourself, it is not acceptable to simply say, “**My name,**” and expect the person to understand what you’re talking about. Likewise, it is equally unacceptable to walk up to a person and say (without adding anything else), “**Jack,**” or “**Marge,**” or whatever other name you might imagine.

### How to Fix It:

Writers must understand that for every single, complete, individual **image** they put on paper, they must also put some corresponding **action** (also known as a *verb* or *predicate*). As previously stated, it is not sufficient to simply say, “**My name.**” Such a construction is essentially meaningless. Instead, you must say, “**My name is Jack,**” or something similar. Likewise, it is not sufficient to only say, “**A brown dog with a bushy tail,**” or “**The cat,**” or “**My favorite color.**” All the aforementioned constructions lack some sort of corresponding action.

The only way to fix an incomplete sentence, then, is to add a corresponding action to the already-existing subject. Instead of “**A brown dog with a bushy tail,**” you must say, “**A brown dog with a bushy tail ran down the street.**” And instead of saying, “**The cat,**” you must say, “**The cat climbed the tree.**” Instead of saying, “**My favorite color,**” you must complete the sentence by adding, “**is blue.**”

|                             |   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| <b>Incomplete Sentence:</b> | A brown dog with a bushy tail.                            |
| <b>Complete Sentence:</b>   | A brown dog with a bushy tail <i>ran down the street.</i> |
| <b>Incomplete Sentence:</b> | The cat.  |
| <b>Complete Sentence:</b>   | The cat <i>climbed the tree.</i>                          |

**Incomplete Sentence:** My favorite color.  
**Complete Sentence:** My favorite color *is blue*.

As stated earlier, a useful way to test whether or not a sentence is complete is to identify the *complete subject* of the sentence, and to then turn it into a question. The two most effective questions to ask involve the phrases “\_\_\_\_\_ **is what?**” and “**What happened to \_\_\_\_\_?**” The question you choose will depend upon the content of the sentence. For example, consider again the sentence, “**A brown dog with a bushy tail ran through the woods.**” If we correctly identify the subject as “**A brown dog with a bushy tail,**” we might ask the question, “***What happened to the brown dog with a bushy tail?***” Using the examples above, we might ask the questions “***My favorite color is what?***” or “***What happened to the cat?***” or “***My favorite color is what?***” Because all three of those questions have very clear answers, the sentences which prompted them are considered complete.

A trap that many people fall into when correcting an incomplete sentence is to add a phrase that begins with an *ing* or *ed* ending. For example, if the complete subject of a sentence was “**The tiny squirrel,**” adding the phrase “**running along the fence**” would NOT make the sentence complete. The phrase “running along the fence” would simply become part of the complete subject. Why? Because “**running along the fence**” describes what the squirrel was doing, but it doesn’t explain what the squirrel actually did. Some examples follow. In each of them, the *predicate* is printed in italicized text.

**Incomplete Sentence:** The tiny squirrel.  
**Incomplete Sentence:** The tiny squirrel running along the fence.  
**Complete Sentence:** The tiny squirrel running along the fence *was gray.*  
**Complete Sentence:** The tiny squirrel running along the fence *had a big tail.*  
**Complete Sentence:** The tiny squirrel running along the fence *jumped three times.*  
**Complete Sentence:** The tiny squirrel running along the fence *ate an acorn.*

Notice that if you were to transform the two incomplete sentences into questions, neither of them would be answered. The phrase “**The tiny squirrel**” can’t answer the question “**What happened to the tiny squirrel?**” Likewise, the phrase “**The tiny squirrel running along the fence**” cannot answer the question “**What happened to the tiny squirrel running along the fence?**” It is definitely true that the squirrel was running, but the sentence doesn’t answer the question directly. You’d have to change the word “**running**” to “he ran” to answer the question “**What happened to the tiny squirrel running along the fence?**” The fact that “**running**” needs to be changed means the sentence is incomplete.

Let’s take a look at another example. Notice how the question “**What happened to \_\_\_\_\_?**” helps you easily determine which sentences are complete and which ones are incomplete. Again, the *predicate* of each sentence has been italicized.

|                             |  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <b>Incomplete Sentence:</b> | My old boots.  |
| <b>Incomplete Sentence:</b> | My old boots which smelled like mud.                                   |
| <b>Complete Sentence:</b>   | My old boots which smelled like mud <i>were lost</i> .                 |
| <b>Complete Sentence:</b>   | My old boots which smelled like mud <i>were hidden under the bed</i> . |
| <b>Complete Sentence:</b>   | My old boots which smelled like mud <i>reminded me of spring</i> .     |
| <b>Complete sentence:</b>   | My old boots which smelled like mud <i>had disappeared</i> .           |

When you ask, “What happened to my old boots which smelled like mud?” you could easily answer with any of the following:

*They were lost.*  
*They were hidden under the bed.*  
*They reminded me of spring.*  
*They had disappeared.*

Perhaps the most effective way to tell whether or not a sentence is complete or incomplete is to walk up to someone and read the sentence. If the sentence can stand on its own, the person will understand what you’re talking about. If the sentence can’t, then the person won’t understand you at all. Try saying, “My old boots,” to someone and you’ll get some funny looks. Try saying, “My old boots which smelled like mud,” and whoever you’re talking to will (hopefully) politely ask you to **complete** your **incomplete** sentence.

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## *Incomplete Sentences:* Exercises

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**Part One**

**Directions:** Decide whether or not each of the sentences below is complete or incomplete. Write “I” for incomplete, or “C” for complete in the blanks provided.

1.     \_\_\_ The tiny squirrel running along the fence.
2.     \_\_\_ The chipmunk was climbing the tree.
3.     \_\_\_ My pet turtle has four legs.
4.     \_\_\_ The baseball bat.
5.     \_\_\_ My older sister.
6.     \_\_\_ My best friend is coming over this weekend.
7.     \_\_\_ The strangest thing I’ve ever seen.
8.     \_\_\_ The longest day of the year was last Thursday.
9.     \_\_\_ Five pounds of delicious chocolate.
10.    \_\_\_ Two hours later, my mother.
11.    \_\_\_ Five days ago, his sister lost her first tooth.
12.    \_\_\_ The ink, which was bright blue, left an ugly stain on the shirt.
13.    \_\_\_ The old bird who lost all his feathers.
14.    \_\_\_ The cake, which tasted wonderful.
15.    \_\_\_ The detective, searching the room, found an old newspaper clipping.
16.    \_\_\_ The cat, sitting on the wall.

17. \_\_\_\_\_ The cat, who sits on the wall all day.
18. \_\_\_\_\_ The baseball bat, which weighs five pounds.
19. \_\_\_\_\_ Our dog, whose name is Ollie, can jump through hoops.
20. \_\_\_\_\_ My older sister, whose name is Nancy.

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**Part Two**

**Directions:** Using the lines provided, use the words “is” and “are” to complete the following incomplete sentences.

21. The happy, slobbering dogs

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22. The king, who is known for his kindness,

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23. The birds, flying overhead,

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24. My lunchbox, which contained two sandwiches and an apple,

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25. The pad of paper

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26. The pad of paper sitting on the table

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27. Eating six eggs for breakfast

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28. Reading a book

---

29. Reading a book in front of a fire

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30. Running through the woods, the fox

---

31. Running through the woods, the red fox with a crooked ear

---

32. The proper way to get there

---

33. The music playing in the background

---

34. On the table

---

35. The twinkling stars

---

36. The twinkling stars, which shine so brightly,

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37. Chocolate cake with raspberry filling

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38. The giraffe's long neck

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39. The giraffe's long neck and long, spindly legs

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40. A tray of mouth-watering cookies and frosted cupcakes

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### Part Three

**Directions:** Using the lines provided, use any words *other than* "is" and "are" to complete the incomplete sentences.

41. The happy, slobbering dogs

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42. The king, who is known for his kindness,

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43. The birds, flying overhead,

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44. My lunchbox, which contained two sandwiches and an apple,

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45. The pad of paper

---

46. The pad of paper sitting on the table

---

47. Eating six eggs for breakfast

---

48. Reading a book

---

49. Reading a book in front of a fire

---

50. Running through the woods, the fox

---

51. Running through the woods, the red fox with a crooked ear

---

52. The proper way to get there

---

53. The music playing in the background

---

54. On the table

---

55. The twinkling stars

---

56. The twinkling stars, which shine so brightly,

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57. Chocolate cake with raspberry filling

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58. The giraffe's long neck

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59. The giraffe's long neck and long, spindly legs

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60. A tray of mouth-watering cookies and frosted cupcakes

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## Solutions to *Incomplete Sentences* Exercises

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### Part One Solutions:

1. Incomplete
2. Complete
3. Complete
4. Incomplete
5. Incomplete
6. Complete
7. Incomplete
8. Complete
9. Incomplete
10. Incomplete
11. Complete
12. Complete
13. Incomplete
14. Incomplete
15. Complete
16. Incomplete
17. Incomplete
18. Incomplete
19. Complete
20. Incomplete

### Part Two Solutions:

21. The happy, slobbering dogs are playing in the yard.
22. The king, who is known for his kindness, is scheduled to arrive tomorrow.
23. The birds, flying overhead, are going to Florida.
24. My lunchbox, which contained two sandwiches and an apple, is missing.
25. The pad of paper is on the desk.
26. The pad of paper sitting on the table is blue.
27. Eating six eggs for breakfast is not such a great idea.
28. Reading a book is fun.
29. Reading a book in front of a fire is delightful.
30. Running through the woods, the fox is escaping the hounds.
31. Running through the woods, the red fox with a crooked ear is sad.
32. The proper way to get there is to take a left at the end of the street.
33. The music playing in the background is John Coletrane.
34. On the table is a basket of blueberries.

35. The twinkling stars are shining brightly.
36. The twinkling stars, which shine so brightly, are very far away.
37. Chocolate cake with raspberry filling is my favorite.
38. The giraffe's long neck is useful for reaching the tops of trees.
39. The giraffe's long neck and long, spindly legs are a strange sight to see.
40. A tray of mouth-watering cookies and frosted cupcakes is waiting for you.

**Part Three Solutions:**

41. The happy, slobbering dogs love to run and play.
42. The king, who is known for his kindness, has decided to throw a party.
43. The birds, flying overhead, would like someone to scatter popcorn on the ground.
44. My lunchbox, which contained two sandwiches and an apple, also contains a napkin.
45. The pad of paper has a grocery list on it.
46. The pad of paper sitting on the table needs to be put away.
47. Eating six eggs for breakfast might give you a stomachache.
48. Reading a book can be very rewarding.
49. Reading a book in front of a fire reminds me of being five years old.
50. Running through the woods, the fox leapt over a log.
51. Running through the woods, the red fox with a crooked ear dashed through a pile of leaves.
52. The proper way to get there involves taking a left at the end of the street.
53. The music playing in the background makes me want to dance.
54. On the table you'll find something tasty.
55. The twinkling stars shine like fireflies in the night.
56. The twinkling stars, which shine so brightly, can make you dizzy.
57. Chocolate cake with raspberry filling makes an excellent dessert.
58. The giraffe's long neck allows him to see things that are far away.
59. The giraffe's long neck and long, spindly legs make him look taller than he actually is.
60. A tray of mouth-watering cookies and frosted cupcakes will make you smile.