

Sentence Fragments:

A Skill Sheet

Students and teachers often become confused between incomplete sentences and sentence fragments. While 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*, a **sentence fragment** may be defined as *a group of words that creates neither a subject, or a predicate*.

Following are some examples of sentence fragments.

1. In the car.
2. With a brand-new hat.
3. Running in the woods.
4. Singing a song.
5. At the party.

Some students might look at the third sentence and claim that the action is “running.” The reason that “running” cannot be a predicate or the primary verb in the sentence is because it is not accompanied by a specific subject. Subjects and verbs – as far as sentences are concerned – are inseparable. If at any point you find a word that appears to be an action, check to see whether or not it is accompanied by a subject. If you can’t figure out *who* or *what* is performing the action, then chances are you’re dealing with a sentence fragment.

Notice that none of the five examples above contains a specific action (or *predicate*), and a person (or *subject*) to perform the action. To transform all five sentence fragments into full-fledged sentences, then, all we need to do is to add a subject and a predicate. Let’s use the subject “I,” and the predicate “saw him.”

1. I saw him in the car.
2. I saw him with a brand-new hat.
3. I saw him running in the woods.
4. I saw him singing a song.
5. I saw him at the party.

Likewise, sentence fragments can be transformed into a full-fledged sentence by placing a subject and predicate on the other side of the fragment, as in the following examples:

1. In the car I saw him.
2. With a brand new hat I saw him.
3. Running in the woods I saw him.
4. Singing a song I saw him.
5. At the party I saw him.

Explanation of the Problem:

Sentence fragments occur because writers attempt to make their writing mimic speech patterns. More specifically, sentence fragments occur because writers attempt to mimic **pauses** in speech patterns.

Below is a paragraph that contains an average number of pauses, each of which is denoted by a particular punctuation mark. Most of the pauses are marked by a comma, but two of them are marked with a set of dashes.

Today I took a walk. I wandered through town, watching the people and cars as they passed. On Congress Street I saw a bus pull up to the curb. An old man stepped out, wearing a long coat and carrying a cane. He started walking toward me, shuffling as he went. His eyes were blue. I don't know why I noticed him. But there was something about his funny walk and the way he used his cane that caught my attention.

If someone who typically has trouble with sentence fragments heard the above paragraph read out loud and was asked to write it down exactly as he or she heard it, he or she might produce the following:

Today I took a walk. I wandered through town. *Watching the people and cars as they passed.* On Congress Street I saw a bus pull up to the curb. An old man stepped out. *Wearing a long coat and carrying a cane.* He started walking toward me. *Shuffling as he went.* His eyes were blue. I don't know why I noticed him. But there was something about his funny walk and the way he used his cane that caught my attention.

Notice that wherever a comma or dash should have appeared, the writer used periods and capital letters, thereby creating a series of sentence fragments. Because someone who creates sentence fragments is simply trying to create pauses in a piece of writing, it should come as no surprise to learn that the true cause of a sentence fragment is **a writer's lack of understanding of the function of certain forms of punctuation**. Roughly 90% of all sentence fragments are produced because writers don't understand how to use commas. The other 10% are due to a misunderstanding of dashes, colons, and semicolons.

How to Fix It:

Fixing a sentence fragment can be as easy as attaching the fragment to the sentence in front of it. Simply remove the period from the preceding sentence, replace it with a comma, and change the capital letter to a lowercase letter. In the first half of each of the following three examples, the first set of constructions includes a sentence and a sentence fragment; the second half includes a complete sentence.

1. The bird flew through the air. Swooping and diving.
 The bird flew through the air, swooping and diving.

2. My little brother ran through the door. His face clammy and pale.
My little brother ran through the door, his face clammy and pale.
3. I was so tired I could barely stand up. Especially when I remembered that the work wasn't finished.
I was so tired I could barely stand up, especially when I remembered that the work wasn't finished.

Likewise, some (but not all) sentence fragments can be corrected by attaching them to the beginning of the sentence that precedes them.

1. Swooping and diving, the bird flew through the air.
2. His face clammy and pale, my little brother ran through the door.

When fixing a sentence fragment it is important to realize that the reason you're joining a fragment to the sentence before it is because the fragment represents *part of a complete thought*. Sentences, after all, are groups of words that contain complete thoughts.

Incomplete Sentences: Exercises

Part One

Directions: Using the subject “We” and the predicate “ate lunch,” transform the following sentence fragments into full-fledged sentences. Be sure to place the subject and predicate *before* the fragment.

1. at the restaurant

2. inside

3. in a tree house with my friends

4. with a family of chimpanzees

5. around one o'clock

* * *

Part Two

Directions: Using the subject “We” and the predicate “ate lunch,” transform the following sentence fragments into full-fledged sentences. This time, be sure to place the subject and predicate *after* the fragment.

6. at the restaurant

7. inside

8. in a tree house with my friends

9. with a family of chimpanzees

10. around one o'clock

Part Three

Directions: Using the subject “My favorite thing to do” and the predicate “is,” transform the following sentence fragments into full-fledged sentences. Place the subject and the predicate *before* the fragment.

11. to dance in the rain

12. to eat a whole pizza by myself

13. to go sledding in winter

14. to visit my best friend, who has a swimming pool in the backyard

15. to read a truly excellent adventure book

* * *

Part Four

Directions: Using the subject “My favorite thing to do” and the predicate “is,” transform the following sentence fragments into full-fledged sentences. This time, place the subject and the predicate *after* the fragment.

16. to dance in the rain

17. to eat a whole pizza by myself.

18. to go sledding in winter

19. to visit my best friend, who has a swimming pool in the backyard

20. to read a truly excellent adventure book

* * *

Part Five

Directions: Eliminate the sentence fragment in each of the examples below by altering punctuation marks and capital letters.

21. We saw the dog run. Down the street.

22. We saw the dog run. Barking and howling

23. We saw the dog run. Down the street, barking and howling.

24. We saw the dog run. Barking and howling down the street.

25. The book fell. Landing with a thud.

26. The book fell. On the ground.

27. The book fell. Landing with a thud on the ground.

28. The book fell. On the ground, landing with a thud.

29. The sharks swam closer to the boat. Circling slowly.

30. I saw them arrive. One by one. Asking for directions.

* * *

Part Six

Directions: Rewrite the following passages, eliminating all the sentence fragments.

31. The wind began to howl. Making the windows rattle and the tree branches click eerily in the night. Outside it was dark. The moon had risen over the trees. About an hour ago. Now it hung in the sky. Like a brilliant silver disk.

Solutions to *Sentence Fragment* Exercises

Part One: Solutions

1. We ate lunch at the restaurant.
2. We ate lunch inside.
3. We ate lunch in a tree house with my friends.
4. We ate lunch with a family of chimpanzees.
5. We ate lunch around one o'clock.

Part Two: Solutions

6. At the restaurant we ate lunch.
7. Inside, we ate lunch.
8. In a tree house with my friends we ate lunch.
9. With a family of chimpanzees we ate lunch.
10. Around one o'clock we ate lunch.

Part Three: Solutions

11. My favorite thing to do is to dance in the rain.
12. My favorite thing to do is to eat a whole pizza by myself.
13. My favorite thing to do is to go sledding in winter.
14. My favorite thing to do is to visit my best friend, who has a swimming pool in the backyard.
15. My favorite thing to do is to read a truly excellent adventure book

Part Four: Solutions

16. To dance in the rain is my favorite thing to do.
17. To eat a whole pizza by myself is my favorite thing to do.
18. To go sledding in winter is my favorite thing to do.
19. To visit my best friend, who has a swimming pool in the backyard is my favorite thing to do
20. To read a truly excellent adventure book is my favorite thing to do.

Part Five: Solutions

21. We saw the dog run down the street.
22. We saw the dog run, barking and howling
23. We saw the dog run down the street, barking and howling.
24. We saw the dog run, barking and howling down the street.
25. The book fell, landing with a thud.
26. The book fell on the ground.
27. The book fell, landing with a thud on the ground.
28. The book fell on the ground, landing with a thud.
29. The sharks swam closer to the boat, circling slowly.
30. I saw them arrive one by one, asking for directions.

Part Six: Solutions

31. The wind began to howl, making the windows rattle and the tree branches click eerily in the night. Outside it was dark. The moon had risen over the trees about an hour ago. Now it hung in the sky like a brilliant silver disk.
32. The puppy was sitting in the grass, playing with a tennis ball. He took the ball in his mouth and dashed across the lawn, his tiny feet pounding the ground. As he ran a dragonfly sprang up from the grass, hovering above his head. The puppy stopped to sniff it. The dragonfly's wings flashed in the sunlight, its long black body sinking and rising in the air. The puppy let the ball fall out of his mouth. It landed softly in the grass. He sat back on his haunches, studying the strange creature in front of him. He barked once. Then he barked again. The dragonfly didn't move. It just kept hovering in the air as if it hadn't heard the bark at all. Finally the puppy lunged at the insect, his tiny jaws snapping. The dragonfly dodged easily and flew away over the sea of grass until it was out of sight.