

# Fragments and Run-ons

**What is a complete sentence?**

# COMPLETE SENTENCES

A complete sentence is not merely a group of words with a capital letter at the beginning and a period or question mark at the end. **A complete sentence has three components:**

1. a subject (the actor in the sentence)
2. a predicate (the verb or action), and
3. a complete thought (it can stand alone and make sense—it's independent).

Sentences can be very short, with only two or three words expressing a complete thought:

**John waited.**

This sentence has a subject (John) and a verb (waited), and it expresses a complete thought.

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We can understand the idea completely with just those two words, so again, it's independent—an **independent clause**. But independent clauses (i.e., complete sentences) can be expanded to contain a lot more information, like this:

**John waited for the bus all morning.**

**John waited for the bus all morning in the rain last Tuesday.**

**Wishing he'd brought his umbrella, John waited for the bus all morning in the rain last Tuesday.**

**Wishing he'd brought his umbrella and dreaming of his nice warm bed, John waited for the bus all morning in the rain last Tuesday, determined to make it to class for his test.**

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As your sentences grow more complicated, it gets harder to spot and stay focused on the basic elements of a complete sentence, but if you look carefully at the examples, you'll see that **the main thought is still that John waited**—one main subject and one main verb. No matter how long or short the other sentence parts are, none of them can stand alone and make sense.

Being able to find **the main subject, the main verb, and the complete thought** is the first trick to learn for identifying fragments and run-ons.

# SENTENCE FRAGMENTS

A sentence **fragment** is an **incomplete sentence**. Some fragments are incomplete because they lack either a subject or a verb, or both.

The fragments that most students have trouble with are **dependent clauses**—they have a subject and a verb, so they look like complete sentences, but they **don't express a complete thought**. They're called "dependent" because they can't stand on their own:

**Because his car was in the shop (...What did he do?)**

**After the rain stops (...What then?)**

**When you finally take the test (...What will happen?)**

**Since you asked (...Will you get the answer?)**

**If you want to go with me (...What should you do?)**

Does each of these examples have a **subject**? Yes. Does each have a **verb**? Yes.

So what makes the thought incomplete? It's the first word:

- Because
- After
- When
- Since
- If

These words belong to a special class of words called subordinators or subordinating conjunctions. Understanding subordinating conjunctions can help you eliminate 90% of your fragments.

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**First, you need to know that subordinating conjunctions do three things:**

1. join two sentences together
2. make one of the sentences dependent on the other for a complete thought  
(make one a dependent clause)
3. indicate a logical relationship

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Second, you need to recognize the subordinators when you see them. **Here is a list of common subordinating conjunctions and the relationships they indicate:**

- **Cause / Effect:** because, since, so that
- **Comparison / Contrast:** although, even though, though, whereas, while
- **Place & Manner:** how, however, where, wherever
- **Possibility / Conditions:** if, whether, unless
- **Relation:** that, which, who
- **Time:** after, as, before, since, when, whenever, while, until



# REMEMBER

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Every **dependent clause needs to be attached to an independent clause** (the independent clause can stand on its own).

How do you find and fix your fragments?

- Remember the basics: **subject, verb, and complete thought.**

# RUN-ONS

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These are also called fused sentences.

You are making a run-on when you put two complete sentences (a subject and its predicate and another subject and its predicate) together in one sentence without separating them properly. Here's an example of a run-on:

**My favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus it is very garlicky.**

This one sentence actually contains two complete sentences. Luckily, there are many ways to correct this run-on sentence.

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You could use a **semicolon**:

**My favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus; it is very garlicky.**

You could use a comma and a **coordinating conjunction** (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so):

My favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus, for it is very garlicky. -OR- My favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus, and it is very garlicky.

You could use a **subordinating conjunction**:

My favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus because it is very garlicky. -OR- Because it is so garlicky, my favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus.

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You could make it into **two separate sentences with a period in between:**

My favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus. It is very garlicky.

You could use an **em-dash (a long dash) for emphasis:**

My favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus—it is very garlicky.

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You CANNOT simply add a comma between the two sentences, or you'll end up with what's called a "**comma splice.**" Here's an example of a comma splice:

**My favorite Mediterranean spread is hummus, it is very garlicky.**

You can fix a comma splice the same way you fix a run-on—either change the punctuation or add a conjunction.

# FINDING RUN-ONS

Try these two tests:

1. Turn your sentences into yes/no questions.

**Is my favorite Mediterranean spread hummus?**

2. Turn your sentences into tag questions (sentences that end with a questioning phrase at the very end).

**My favorite Mediterranean spread hummus, isn't it?**

These are two things that nearly everyone can do easily if the sentence is not a run-on, but they become next to impossible if it is.