

Sentence Sense

WHAT MAKES A SENTENCE WORK? HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW.

By Suzanne Bilyeu

Above the counter at the neighborhood diner is a sign:

Who is not responsible? Is the manager saying that *he* is not responsible if someone walks off with your jacket? Does it mean that *you* are not responsible if your jacket is stolen? Perhaps the manager would buy you a new one. The sign would be unmistakably clear if it read: "The management is not responsible for lost or stolen property." The message would then be expressed in a complete sentence—the basic unit of currency for clear communication.



THE 3 ESSENTIALS

A complete sentence requires three basic ingredients:

A **Subject**: This is the person, place, or thing that is the "star" of the sentence. To locate the subject(s), ask yourself: "What or who is doing something in this sentence?" or "To what or to whom is something happening?"

A **Predicate**: This is the "action" part of the sentence. It contains the verb(s) that tells what the subject is doing, what is happening to it, or what condition it is in.

A **Complete Thought**: A subject and a predicate do not form a complete sentence unless they contain a complete thought or idea.

> BEWARE OF FRAGMENTS

Some groups of words contain a subject and a predicate, but they are "sentence wannabes" that cannot stand alone.

Example: *When Brenda first met Billy.*

It has a subject—*Brenda*—and a verb—*met*. That makes it a **clause** but not a sentence: It does not form a complete thought. This **sentence fragment** leaves the reader wondering: "What happened when Brenda first met Billy?" (Because it depends on additional information to give it meaning, this type of fragment is also known as a **dependent** or **subordinate clause**.) When you complete the thought, you complete the sentence.

Example: *When Brenda first met Billy, she thought he was a major geek.*



Here is another type of sentence fragment: *Decided to eat the entire box of doughnuts.*

At first glance, this looks like a sentence, but it is actually a **phrase**—a group of words that supplies part of the



information in a sentence. A phrase can act as a noun or other part of speech. But it does not include a verb and its subject, nor does it express a complete thought. Adding a subject completes the thought and turns the phrase into a sentence.



Example: Billy decided to eat the entire box of doughnuts.

➤ BASIC SENTENCE TYPES

SIMPLE SENTENCE:

A **simple sentence** contains a least one subject and at least one predicate; it can stand alone because it expresses a complete thought. Because it can stand alone, it can also be called an **independent** or **main clause**.

Example 1: She thought he was a major geek.

Example 2: Tom and Phil made the pizza.

COMPOUND SENTENCE:

A **compound sentence** is two or more simple sentences, or **independent clauses**, joined together by a connecting word such as *and* or *but*. Sometimes the clauses are separated by a semicolon.

Example 1: Tom and Phil made the pizza, and Lizzie went to the store for soda.



Example 2: Keisha aced the algebra exam; Fred was not so fortunate.

➤ WHAT DOES A SENTENCE DO?

Sentence functions fall into four categories: **declarative**, **interrogative**, **imperative**, and **exclamatory**.

1 A **declarative sentence** does exactly what its name implies: It “declares” or states something.

Example: Tonight, the Lakers will play the Knicks.

2 An **interrogative sentence** “interrogates”—it asks a question.

Example: Who was the contestant most recently fired by The Donald?

3 An **imperative sentence** commands, requests, or instructs. The subject is most often *you*—unstated, but understood.

Example: Come here right now.

4 Shout it out with an **exclamatory sentence**, which expresses strong emotion.

Example: I hope we will never again undergo such an ordeal!

➤ DOES IT RUN ON AND ON AND ON?

A **run-on sentence** consists of two or more simple sentences run together without correct punctuation.

Example: Joe plays varsity football he is the team’s starting quarterback.

This run-on is easy to repair. Just do one of the following:

1 Break it into two sentences: Joe plays varsity football. He is the team’s starting quarterback.

2 Separate the sentences with a semicolon: Joe plays varsity football; he is the team’s starting quarterback.

3 Use a connecting word (*and*, *or*, *yet*, *so*, *for*, *nor*, *but*) to form a compound sentence: Joe plays varsity football, and he is the team’s starting quarterback.

Another type of run-on sentence is called a **comma splice**.

Example: Joe plays varsity football, he is the team’s starting quarterback.

Remember: A comma alone isn’t enough to separate the clauses. The quickest fix is to exchange the comma for a semicolon or add a connecting word.



SKILL DRILL

FIND THE FRAGMENTS Some of the word groups below are complete sentences; others are mere pretenders. If a word group is a complete sentence, write "OK" in the blank below it. If it is a fragment, make it into a complete sentence. Be as creative as you like, but make sure you include all three elements of a complete sentence.

1. All the President's men.

2. Decided we would not skip class again.

3. Brenda and Billy could not decide which movie to see.

4. When school starts in the fall.

5. Go away.

ROOT OUT THE RUN-ONS Some of the word groups below are compound sentences; others are run-ons. If the sentence is correct, write "OK" in the blank below it. If not, repair the run-on using one of the methods outlined on the previous page.

1. I have finished my homework; now I will play my guitar for a while.

2. Joe plays guitar his brother is a drummer.

3. Dancing makes me thirsty, I am craving an ice-cold soda.

4. You have done an excellent job, so I would like to treat you to a movie.

5. Welcome to my party those are such lovely clown shoes you're wearing.
