

This file is to be used only for a purpose specified by Palgrave Macmillan, such as checking proofs, preparing an index, reviewing, endorsing or planning coursework/other institutional needs. You may store and print the file and share it with others helping you with the specified purpose, but under no circumstances may the file be distributed or otherwise made accessible to any other third parties without the express prior permission of Palgrave Macmillan. Please contact [rights@palgrave.com](mailto:rights@palgrave.com) if you have any queries regarding use of the file.

Proof

PART

2

## SENTENCE STRUCTURE

6

### What makes a sentence a sentence?


Like a one-man band, a sentence must be entirely self-reliant.

Just as a one-man band makes music without the help of other musicians, a sentence must make sense *all by itself*, without the help of neighbouring sentences. To take the analogy further, in the same way that a one-man band always contains a mouth organ and a drum, the two fundamental things that a standard sentence must never be without are a subject and a finite verb.



What makes a sentence a sentence?

39

 Note: simply beginning a group of words with a capital letter and ending with a full stop isn't enough to make a sentence.

Take heart, though: if you have ever had work handed back to you with 'incomplete sentence' scrawled in the margin, you can comfort yourself with the fact that this is a surprisingly common problem – even among students studying English! The information in this section will help you conquer the problem once and for all.

## Two essential ingredients: a subject and a finite verb

### What is a subject?

The subject of a sentence tells us what the sentence is about. It answers the question, 'Who or what is performing the action of the sentence?'

### What is a finite verb?

The finite verb relates directly to the subject. It is what makes the subject come to life, in that it tells us what that subject is doing (or has done or will do). It shows tense (past/present/future), and it changes its form to match the subject in number (singular or plural) and in person (I/you/he/she/ it/we/they).

### Recognising subjects and finite verbs

In the following sentences, I have underlined both the subject and the finite verb:

- ✓ A laissez-faire economist [subject] would disapprove [finite verb] of state intervention in all but the most necessary of cases.
- ✓ Trace evidence at the scene of the crime [subject] includes [finite verb] *footprints, soil samples, paint fragments and blood splatters.*
- ✓ DNA [subject] is [finite verb] *the main constituent of chromosomes.*]/unl[

### What other types of verbs are there?

There are other verbs – known as non-finite verbs – that do not go hand in hand with the subject of the sentence, and always stay in the same form. These fall into three groups:

- ▶ present participles, which end in ‘-ing’ (deciding, varying, feeling, being)
- ▶ past participles (decided, varied, felt, been)
- ▶ infinitives (to decide, to vary, to feel, to be)

A sentence may or may not contain any mixture of these verbs. The important thing is that it should contain at least one *finite* verb – a verb that tells us what the subject is doing.

**The Standard Sentence Tester**

- ⊗ **Read for sense:** Read the 'sentence' out loud. Does it express a *complete* thought or action? Does it make sense in isolation? If you are at all unsure, go on to the next step.
- ⊗ **Check for a subject:** Ask yourself, 'Who, or what, is performing the action of this sentence?' This is the subject. If you can't find one, you're in trouble: what you've written is not a proper sentence. If you can locate a subject, go on to the next step.
- ⊗ **Check for a finite verb:** Does the would-be sentence contain a finite verb that tells us what the subject is doing?  
(Bear in mind that there may be more than one subject and more than one finite verb.)

**Punctuating the end of a sentence**

The most important thing to signal to the reader is where one sentence ends and the next begins, and the commonest way to do this is with a full stop. A sentence may also end with a question mark or an exclamation mark (though you will rarely, if ever, need to use an exclamation mark in the course of writing an essay).

## How to avoid writing in sentence fragments

### What is a sentence fragment?

A 'sentence fragment' is just another name for an incomplete sentence – a sentence that doesn't make sense by itself because it lacks either a subject or a finite verb. A good number of sentence fragments are in fact tail ends of sentences that have become detached from the main clause, like this:

✘ *The final band in the line-up was a group called The Raucous Racoons. Which nobody had ever heard of.*

### Recognising sentence fragments

Some of the following examples are complete sentences and some are fragments. Can you see which are which? (Answers below.)

- a *Emphasizing the fact that more resources are needed.*
- b *Many of these activities put additional strains on government spending.*
- c *To ensure that safety procedures are put into place across the board.*
- d *Cases such as these show the many levels and complexities of the abortion debate.*
- e *For instance, rape victims, young mothers, and mothers at risk.*
- f *Which demonstrates that the benefits of poverty relief reach across the entire socio-economic spectrum.*

Answers: b and d are complete sentences; a, c, e and f are sentence fragments.

### Rewriting sentence fragments

The following sentence fragments have been rewritten as whole sentences. For clarity's sake, I have underlined the changes made to the original fragments.

- ✘ *The reason being a simple one: healthcare affects every one of us, whether we're nineteen or ninety.*
- ✔ *The reason is a simple one: healthcare affects every one of us, whether we're nineteen or ninety.*
- ✘ *Which requires the provision of a professional army paid for entirely by the State.*
- ✔ *This course of action requires the provision of a professional army paid for entirely by the State.*
- ✘ *To illustrate just one of the many ways in which art may enrich our lives.*
- ✔ *This benefit illustrates just one of the many ways in which art may enrich our lives.*

### Proofreading for sentence fragments

If you read your work out loud, the chances are that you will be able to hear straight away whether what you have written is a full sentence or just a fragment. If you are uncertain, use the *Standard Sentence Tester* (see p. XX) to check that the phrase contains both a subject and a finite verb, and expresses a complete action or thought.



As well as reading your work out loud, it helps if you imagine each sentence in isolation. If you wrote the sentence up on a wall, would it make sense by itself?

