

Lecture 06: Problems in Sentence Writing

1. Sentence Fragments

The cues that signal a sentence are:

- capital letter at the beginning
- period (question mark, exclamation point) at the end

The readers and writer agree on these being the signals that indicate a sentence. A group of words that is punctuated in this way—as if it's a sentence—but is missing one of the essential three parts (subject, verb, complete thought), is called a **sentence fragment**. Sentence fragments can also be the result of inappropriate placement of punctuation marks or the use of a dependent clause as a sentence.

Ex. When Jack watches television. = **a fragment**
Jack watches television. = **a sentence**

Sentence Fragments without a Verb

Verbs tell what the subject did or is. If the verb is missing, we are left wondering **what the subject did** or **what the subject is**.

My little sister. (My little sister **did or is what?**) My little sister ran away.
My little dog. (My little dog **did or is what?**). My little dog is cuddly.

Sentence Fragments without a Subject and a Verb

Some fragments are missing both subjects and verbs. That means we don't know whom is about or what they did or are.

On the table. The corn is on the table
Over there. My Dogran over there.
From morning until night. I worked from morning until night

Sentence Fragments that are Dependent Clauses

Dependent clauses are groups of words that contain a subject and a verb, but they don't express complete thoughts. If you use them alone, they are sentence fragments.

Whenever I walk the dog.
Until my little sister walks into the room.

Sentence Fragments that are disconnected from Main Clause

Sometimes fragments are pieces of sentences that have become disconnected from the main clause. One of the easiest ways to correct them is to remove the period between the fragment

and the main clause. Other kinds of punctuation may be needed for the newly combined sentence.

Eg. The current city policy on housing is incomplete as it stands. Which is why we believe the proposed amendments should be passed.

Because the current city policy on housing is incomplete as it stands, we believe the proposed amendments should be passed.

2. Run-On Sentences

A **run-on sentence** is a sentence that combines *too many independent clauses* (full sentences) without *proper punctuation* or *connecting-words*. We call it a run-on sentence because it “runs on” for too long without pausing—it is missing commas, semicolons, or conjunctions to clearly separate the ideas.

Examples

- Sally likes soccer she doesn't like running. **Run-on**
- I woke up late I ate a muffin for breakfast then I went to school. **Run-on**

Missing Parts of Run-on Sentences

Run-on sentences are missing punctuation, coordinating conjunctions, or both.

a. Coordinating Conjunctions

To combine two sentences (independent clauses), you should usually use a coordinating conjunction. A coordinating conjunction, like “and,” works like a link between clauses. The seven most common coordinating conjunctions are *and, but, for, nor, or, so, and yet*.

- Sally woke up late, **so** she missed the bus to school.
- Sally ate breakfast, **and** then she went to school.

Ways to Fix Run-On Sentences

a. Fixing Run-ons with Coordinating Conjunctions

A common and easy way to fix a run-on sentence is by adding a coordinating conjunction. Here's a basic run-on sentence:

- Sally likes blueberry muffins she eats them every day for breakfast. **Run-on**

You can see that this sentence runs on for too long without being broken up at all. So, let's use a comma and a coordinating conjunction:

- Sally likes blueberry muffins, **so** she eats them every day for breakfast. **Correct**

b. Fixing Run-ons without Coordinating Conjunctions

If you don't use a coordinating conjunction to correct a run-on sentence, then you should use a semicolon, **NOT a comma**:

- Sally likes blueberry muffins she eats them every day for breakfast. **Run-on**
- Sally likes blueberry muffins; she eats them every day for breakfast. **Correct**

3. Avoiding Wordiness

Our rough drafts are full of extra words, because that's the way most of us speak and think. When we're revising a draft for an academic, scientific, or technical audience, however, we are expected to cut out every extra word and phrase. Taking out extra words frees up space to include more ideas and more evidence. It also helps readers get straight to the point.

When you're revising a rough draft, therefore, keep asking yourself do I really need this?
How many words and phrases can you cut while still communicating your meaning?

- Use **individual words instead of long expressions**
- to come to the conclusion that **WORDY** **to decide**
- to put forward the idea that **WORDY** **to suggest**

Replace wordy stock phrases with single words

WORDY	BETTER	WORDY	BETTER
at the present time	now	in the event that	if
at all times when	whenever	in connection with	about
be of the opinion that	think	in spite of the fact that	although
by means of	by	in the nature of	like
due to the fact that	because	in view of the fact that	because
during the time that	while	it is often the case that	often
for the purpose of	for, so	on a frequent basis	frequently
has the capability to	can	until such time as	until

- **Take out key words and ideas that are repeated unnecessarily.**

The committee members decided to have an office party for the employees' children.
The main reason for their decision to have a party for the children was that employees had been complaining that the company did not pay enough attention to family life.

WORDY

The committee members decided to have an office party for employees' children, mainly because employees had been complaining that the company did not pay enough attention to family life. **BETTER**

- **Take out words already implied by other words in the same sentence.**

The *round yellow* sun shone brightly among the clouds *in the sky*. (Isn't the sun always round? Aren't clouds usually in the sky?) **WORDY**

The sun shone brightly among the clouds. **BETTER**

- **Take out vague words which need explanation instead of precise words**

She *talked* to him *in a loud angry voice*. **WORDY**

She *yelled* at him. **BETTER**

- **Simplify your sentence structure.**

The cliffs are made of basalt, *which is* an igneous rock. **WORDY**

The cliffs are made of basalt, an igneous rock. **BETTER**

- **Reword sentences beginning with "there are," "it is," and similar expressions**

There are many factors contributing to the obesity epidemic. **WORDY**

Many factors contribute to the obesity epidemic. **BETTER**

- **Limit or avoid phrases describing your attitudes and writing strategies.**

It seems to me that teachers should allow students to skip class. **WORDY**

Teachers should allow students to skip class. **BETTER**

4. Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers

Dangling modifiers have no word or phrase to describe; they just dangle, or hang, in the sentence without something to hold on to. Dangling modifiers cause the sentence to lack coherence. Recognize the following types of dangling modifiers and their corrections.

DANGLING PARTICIPLE PHRASE:

Smoking my cigar, a fire engine came roaring around the corner.

Revision 1: As I was smoking my cigar, a fire engine came roaring around the corner.

DANGLING GERUND PHRASE:

After drilling my tooth, my cavity stopped aching.

Revision 1: After the dentist drilled my tooth, my cavity stopped aching. **Revision 2:** After drilling my tooth, my dentist stopped my cavity from aching.

DANGLING INFINITIVE PHRASE:

To become a physician, aptitude and hard work are needed.

Revision: To become a physician, one needs to have aptitude and to work hard.

DANGLING ELLIPTICAL CLAUSE:

When fishing, my hook is always baited.

Revision 1: When fishing, I always bait my hook.

Strategies for revising dangling modifiers:

1. Name the appropriate or logical doer of the action as the subject of the main clause:

Example: Having arrived late for practice, a written excuse was needed. Who arrived late?

Having arrived late for practice, Joe Doer needed a written excuse.

2. Change the phrase that dangles into a complete introductory clause by naming the doer of the action in that clause:

Example: Without knowing his name, it was difficult to introduce him. Who didn't know his name?

Since Sally Doer didn't know his name, it was difficult to introduce him.

3. Combine the phrase and main clause into one:

Example: To improve his results, the experiment was done again.

Who wanted to improve results?

The experiment was done again to improve his results.

A **misplaced modifier** is a word, phrase, or clause that is improperly separated from the word or clause it modifies or describes. Because of this separation, the meaning of the sentence is often awkward, ridiculous, illogical, or confusing.

Example 1: On her way home, Jan found a **gold man's** watch.

Correction: On her way home, Jan found a **man's gold** watch.

Example 2: The dealer sold the Cadillac to the buyer **with leather seats**.

Correction: The dealer sold the Cadillac **with the leather seats** to the buyer.

Example 3: The waiter served a dinner roll to the woman **that was well buttered**.

Correction: The waiter served a dinner roll **that was well buttered** to the woman.

One of the most common problems with misplaced modifiers comes with what are called **limiting modifiers**—words like *almost*, *even*, *hardly*, *just*, *merely*, *nearly*, *only* (*only* is the one misplaced most often), *scarcely*, and *simply*. To convey the correct meaning, limiting modifiers must be placed in front of the words they modify.

Only students were asked to bring gym shorts and running shoes.

Students were **only** asked to bring gym shorts and running shoes.

Students were asked **only** to bring gym shorts and running shoes.

Students were asked to bring **only** gym shorts and running shoes.

In the above sentences, the meaning changes as a modifier only moves from place to place.

Larbi Ben M'hidi University, Oum El Bouaghi
Faculty of Letters and Languages
Department of English

Module : CPE
Level : L1
Teacher : Dr. Azeroual