

The Fragment

Recognize a *fragment* when you see one.

A fragment occurs whenever you do these three things:

- You begin a group of words with a capital letter.
- You conclude this group of words with an end mark—either a period [.], question mark [?], or exclamation point [!].
- You neglect to insert a main clause somewhere between the capital letter at the beginning and the end mark concluding the word group.

Every sentence must have *at least* one main clause. A main clause contains an independent subject and verb and expresses a complete thought. Once you have a main clause, you can then add other grammatical elements, *but you must have the main clause as the base of the sentence*.

Read the main clause below, then the additions to it:

Victor sneezed repeatedly.

During the stressful chemistry test, ***Victor sneezed repeatedly.***

Because Julissa wore too much perfume, ***Victor sneezed repeatedly*** during the stressful chemistry test.

Victor sneezed repeatedly, each time asking Janice for a new tissue to blow his nose.

To deal with the stress building up in his head, ***Victor sneezed repeatedly*** as he slogged through the difficult chemistry test.

Slogging through the stressful chemistry test, ***Victor sneezed repeatedly*** while John chewed his pencil and Julissa rubbed her lucky rabbit's foot.

Without the main clause ***Victor sneezed repeatedly,*** all of the sentences above would be fragments.

Know the most common types of fragments and how to fix them.

Fragments result if you punctuate certain word groups as if they are complete sentences. The most common of these word groups are the following: subordinate clauses, participle phrases, infinitive phrases, afterthoughts, verb phrases, and appositives.

You have a number of different options when fixing a fragment. Frequently, you can attach the fragment either to the front or to the end of a nearby main clause. Another option is to add whatever words will give the fragment its own mandatory main clause.

Below you will find examples of different fragments and the revisions that they require to become complete sentences.

Subordinate Clause Fragments

A subordinate clause contains a subordinate conjunction, a subject, and a verb. Because this type of clause does not express a complete thought, it cannot stand alone as a complete sentence. Read this example:

Flooring the accelerator, Juan wove through the heavy traffic. ***As his ex-girlfriend Gigi chased him down the interstate.***

These are possible revisions:

Flooring the accelerator, Juan weaved through the heavy traffic ***as his ex-girlfriend Gigi chased him down the interstate.***

As his ex-girlfriend Gigi chased him down the interstate, Juan floored the accelerator, weaving through the heavy traffic.

Flooring the accelerator, Juan weaved through the heavy traffic. ***In hot pursuit was his ex-girlfriend Gigi, who was chasing him down the interstate.***

Participle Phrase Fragments

A participle phrase usually begins with an ***ing*** or ***ed*** word. In the case of irregular verbs, an irregular past participle, like ***burnt*** or ***spoken***, will begin the phrase. Here is a participle phrase pretending to be a complete sentence:

Aunt Olivia always wears a motorcycle helmet. ***Worrying that a meteor or chunk of space debris will conk her on the head.***

These are possible revisions:

Worrying that a meteor or chunk of space debris will conk her on the head, Aunt Olivia always wears a motorcycle helmet.

Because she worries that a meteor or chunk of space debris will conk her on the head, Aunt Olivia always wears a motorcycle helmet.

Aunt Olivia always wears a motorcycle helmet. ***She worries that a meteor or chunk of space debris will conk her on the head.***

Infinitive Phrase Fragments

An infinitive phrase will begin with an infinitive [**to + base verb**]. Check out the infinitive phrase below masquerading as a complete sentence:

Jiggling his foot nervously, Ronald sat in the provost's office. ***To explain why he had brought Squeeze, his seven-foot pet python, to Mr. Parker's English class.***

These are possible revisions:

Jiggling his foot nervously, Ronald sat in the provost's office ***to explain why he had brought Squeeze, his seven-foot pet python, to Mr. Parker's English class.***

To explain why he had brought Squeeze, his seven-foot pet python, to Mr. Parker's English class, Ronald sat in the provost's office, jiggling his foot nervously.

Jiggling his foot nervously, Ronald sat in the provost's office. ***He needed to explain why he had brought Squeeze, his seven-foot pet python, to Mr. Parker's English class.***

Afterthought Fragments

Afterthought fragments begin with these transitions: ***especially, for example, for instance, like, such as, including,*** and ***except.*** These transitions frequently introduce good details that the writer is providing as an afterthought for previous information. Read the afterthought fragment that follows:

Jacob has several ways to annoy his instructors. ***Such as rolling his eyes, smirking, reading supermarket tabloids during lecture, folding handouts into paper airplanes, and drawing caricatures on his desk.***

These are possible revisions:

Jacob has several ways to annoy his instructors, ***such as rolling his eyes, smirking, reading supermarket***

tabloids during lecture, folding handouts into paper airplanes, and drawing caricatures on his desk.

Rolling his eyes, smirking, reading supermarket tabloids during lecture, folding handouts into paper airplanes, and drawing caricatures on his desk are the many ways Jacob annoys his instructors.

Jacob has several ways to annoy his instructors. *For example, he rolls his eyes, smirks, reads supermarket tabloids during lecture, folds handouts into paper airplanes, and draws caricatures on his desk.*

Lonely Verb Fragments

Lonely verb fragments occur when you have a verb phrase without a subject. Typically, the subject is understood, but because it does not occur within the word group, the necessary main clause is missing. Take a look at this example:

After dinner, Mike and Pat leave their dirty dishes on the back patio. *And let the raccoons, opossums, and armadillos that visit the yard eat the leftovers.*

These are possible revisions:

After dinner, Mike and Pat leave their dirty dishes on the back patio *and let the raccoons, opossums, and armadillos that visit the yard eat the leftovers.*

After dinner, Mike and Pat leave their dirty dishes on the back patio *so that the raccoons, opossums, and armadillos that visit the yard can eat the leftovers.*

After dinner, Mike and Pat leave their dirty dishes on the back patio. *They enjoy letting the raccoons, opossums, and armadillos that visit the yard eat the leftovers.*

Appositive Fragments

An appositive is a word or group of words that renames a noun right beside it. Because an appositive does not contain a main clause, it cannot stand alone as a complete sentence. Look at the example below:

When Dustin pulled into the driveway, Alicia admired his flashy new car. *A red convertible with fancy rims and fuzzy dice hanging from the rearview mirror.*

These are possible revisions:

When Dustin pulled into the driveway, Alicia admired his flashy new car, ***a red convertible with fancy rims and fuzzy dice hanging from the rearview mirror.***

Alicia admired Dustin's flashy new car, ***a red convertible Mustang with fancy rims and fuzzy dice hanging from the rearview mirror,*** when it pulled into the driveway.

When Dustin pulled into the driveway, Alicia admired his flashy new car. ***Dustin recently bought a red convertible with fancy rims and fuzzy dice hanging from the rearview mirror.***

Understand the concept of an *intentional* fragment.

Occasionally, writers will include an intentional fragment to emphasize a point. Read the example below:

Because the milk carton was empty, Paul poured orange juice on his bowl of cereal. ***What a dork!***

Intentional fragments are not grammar errors. They can, however, get you into trouble if you are a beginning writer. Your teachers might think that any fragment in your composition is evidence that you do not understand the concept of a complete sentence. Before you include an intentional fragment in a piece of writing, you should ask your teachers if they will mind.

Use this strategy to proofread for fragments:

If you notice that your teachers are constantly marking fragments in your compositions, you should try this effective proofreading trick to get the problem under control: Read your composition *backwards*.

Rather than starting with the first sentence and reading through the piece in a normal fashion, begin with the *last* sentence and work your way back to the top. This way, the sentences won't flow together. You will instead see each sentence as an individual unit. A word group that does not express a complete thought will stand out so that you can catch it and fix the problem.

Look at this short paragraph which contains an afterthought fragment embedded in it:

David will eat anything on a dare. We have watched him consume many nauseating things. For example, broccoli dipped in chocolate sauce, a raw fish head with the eyes intact, and a

handful of live earthworms. Sharon has to close her eyes, and I've had to fight the urge to gag.

If you read the paragraph backwards, starting with the last sentence first, the fragment announces itself:

Sharon has to close her eyes, and I've had to fight the urge to gag. ***For example, broccoli dipped in chocolate sauce, a raw fish head with the eyes intact, and a handful of live earthworms.*** We have watched him consume many nauseating things. David will eat anything on a dare.

If you try this proofreading strategy, do not use it exclusively. To find other problems, you will still need to read your composition in the normal way as well.



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