

Sentence Fragments

The rules of formal written English differ from those of conversation, mass media, and fiction. One difference is that all sentences in formal written English have to be grammatically complete. Incomplete sentences are called **sentence fragments** and are frowned upon in academic and professional papers. The three types of sentence fragments commonly found in student papers are illustrated and discussed below.

Fragment Type 1. The sentence lacks a subject.

Every complete written sentence must have a subject and a predicate. The subject of a sentence tells who or what the sentence is about. The subject can be found by asking 1) *Who or what caused something to happen?* or 2) *Who or what is being described?* The subject is underlined.

- ☉ Government officials acted quickly to change the rules.
[Who acted quickly? Government officials]
- ☉ These types of metaphors are dangerous in political speech.
[What are dangerous? These types of metaphors]

Subject-less sentences are fragments. To correct these fragments, add a subject to complete them. It doesn't matter if the reader can figure out what the subject is from a previous sentence. The rule is that you must have a subject in each sentence. Once you add a subject, you will automatically make small adjustments to other parts of the sentence.

Acting quickly to change the rules. [doesn't answer 'Who is acting quickly?']
☉ Officials are acting quickly.

Being dangerous in political speech. [doesn't answer 'What is being dangerous?']
☉ Metaphors are dangerous in political speech.

Important in the debate. [doesn't answer 'What is important?']
☉ The idea that humans are capable of reason is important in the debate.

Resumed the search for logical solution. [doesn't answer 'Who resumed the search?']
☉ The committee resumed the search.

Fragment Type 2. The sentence lacks a predicate.

Every complete written sentence has a subject and a predicate. The predicate of a sentence 1) tells what happened, or 2) makes a claim about the subject. A predicate must contain a main verb group that tells when the event stated in the sentence occurred. Every complete sentence has at least one predicate that answers the question 'What happened?' or 'What is true of the subject?' The predicate is underlined.

- ☉ Scientists named the carnivore Carcharodontosaurus saharicus.
- ☉ Television is becoming the nation's favorite pastime.
- ☉ People are less likely to vote on weekends.

Sentences with no predicate or a faulty one are fragments. To correct these fragments, add a predicate or adjust the main verb group of the predicate to tell what happened or what was true of the subject. The main verb group is in bold-face type; the predicate is underlined.

Scientists in honor of its shark-like teeth. [doesn't answer 'What happened?']

☉ Scientists **named** the carnivore in honor of its shark-like teeth.

The technology of cloning will in ten years. [doesn't answer 'What will happen?']

☉ The technology of cloning **will advance** in ten years.

Primetime television viewing. [doesn't answer 'What is true about primetime t.v. viewing?']

☉ Primetime television viewing **is becoming** a national obsession.

People being less likely to vote on the weekends. [doesn't answer 'What is true about people?']

☉ People **are** less likely to vote on the weekends.

Fragment Type 3. The sentence begins with a subordinating expression.

It is a brute fact of formal written English that certain words turn a complete sentence into a fragment. These expressions are called subordinators because they should be used to make a sentence a subpart of another sentence. Some subordinating words are:

<i>after</i>	<i>but</i>	<i>since</i>	<i>unless</i>	<i>whereas</i>
<i>although</i>	<i>despite</i>	<i>so</i>	<i>until</i>	<i>wherever</i>
<i>as</i>	<i>during</i>	<i>so that</i>	<i>even though</i>	<i>whether</i>
<i>as if</i>	<i>even if</i>	<i>than</i>	<i>ever since</i>	<i>whichever</i>
<i>because</i>	<i>for</i>	<i>though</i>	<i>whatever</i>	<i>while</i>
<i>before</i>	<i>if</i>	<i>to</i>	<i>whenever</i>	

☉ The original hypothesis breaks down because there is no evidence to support it.

☉ Although parallel action could not be taken in East Berlin, the Allies signed the agreement.

Other words like *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *how*, *whose*, *which*, and *why* are subordinators when they are not part of a sentence that ends in a question mark.

☉ When the court finally heard the case, it exonerated General Arnold on two counts.

Subordinators should not be confused with transitional words that introduce sentences and are usually followed by a comma:

<i>also</i>	<i>however</i>	<i>meanwhile</i>	<i>rather</i>
<i>finally</i>	<i>in addition</i>	<i>nevertheless</i>	<i>therefore</i>
<i>first, second, etc.</i>	<i>in fact</i>	<i>of course</i>	<i>then</i>
<i>furthermore</i>	<i>instead</i>	<i>on the other hand</i>	<i>thus</i>

☉ Second, the government feared that its explanations might be distorted in the campaign.

Caveats:

- Fragments occur in formal writing but are used for stylistic effect, not accidentally.
- Style sheets differ on which words are subordinating and which are transitional.
- Imperative sentences (e.g. *Know thyself*) are not fragments.

