

Sentence Fragments: Basics

Fragment: A word group that lacks a subject or a verb or does not express a complete thought.

An incomplete construction that tries to stand alone is a sentence fragment. We might say that it is pretending to be a sentence, but it is not.

To be sure, professional writers, especially those engaged in creative writing, may use fragments for stylistic reasons, but they usually know what they are doing. If they were asked, they could explain why they chose an incomplete construction over a complete sentence. Novices and students, however, usually cannot offer such an explanation. More often than not, sentence fragments reveal only that the writer doesn't know what a sentence is (or is not bothering to write complete sentences because he or she thinks it doesn't matter).

One useful way to look at sentence fragments is to recognize that fragments occur when we unnecessarily break a sentence in two. We break off part of a sentence and force it to stand alone when, with proper punctuation, we can connect it to the overall idea, as good sense says we should.

The best way to learn how to recognize and correct sentence fragments is to understand the types of fragments.

TYPES OF FRAGMENTS

Below are the most common types of fragments, with advice on how to correct them. (In the examples, fragments are in ***bold italics***.)

Dependent-Word Fragments

Some word groups that begin with dependent words are fragments. Among the dependent words and phrases that may cause statements to be incomplete are: *after, although, as, as if, because, before, even if, even though, how, if, in order to, since, so that, that, unless, until, what, whatever, when, whenever, where, whereas, wherever, whether, which, whichever, while, who, whoever, and whose*.

Examples:

- Large numbers of people didn't vote in the election. ***Because many people thought that all of the candidates were poor choices.***

- Some students work very hard. *Although others try to get by with a minimum of effort.*
- *While some students work very hard.* Others try to get by with a minimum of effort.
- On his way to work, Bill took a shortcut. *Which he thought would enable him to avoid traffic lights and get him to the office faster.*
- We do research on the Internet. *Whenever we plan to make a major purchase.*

Correcting Dependent-Word Fragments

In most cases, we can correct the dependent-word fragment by attaching it to the sentence that comes before it or to the sentence that comes after it.

(Example: *We do research on the Internet whenever we plan to make a major purchase.*)

If the dependent-word group comes first, use a comma. (Example: *While some students work very hard, others try to get by with a minimum of effort.*)

Another way to correct a dependent-word fragment is to eliminate the dependent word by rewriting the sentence. (Example: *On his way to work, Bill took a shortcut to avoid traffic lights and to get to the office faster.*)

More Notes on Dependent-Word Fragments

> Using a semicolon instead of a period does not correct the fragment. *While some students work very hard; others try to get by with a minimum of effort* is still incorrect. We should not have a dependent-word group on one side of the semicolon and the sentence to which it belongs on the other side.

> Sometimes the dependent words *who*, *that*, *which*, or *where* appear not at

the very start, but near the start, of a dependent-word group. An example is: *The university decided to put more lights near the south parking area. A place where several students have been mugged.* The second word group is a fragment. Write: *The university decided to put more lights near the south parking area, a place where several students have been mugged.*

-ing and to Fragments

Word groups with an *-ing* word at or near the start of the word group are often participial phrases. Word groups with *to* at or near the start of the word group are often infinitive phrases. They cannot stand alone and are therefore fragments.

Examples:

- The astronomer gazed intently through the telescope. *Hoping to catch a glimpse of the meteor.*
- *Feeling like a complete fool.* George discovered that he had left the shopping list at home on the kitchen table.
- He works eight hours a day. *Then going to class for three hours.*
- We plugged in the air conditioner and turned it on. *The result being that all the power went out.*
- She often must lock herself into the bathroom. *To be sure that she can have some privacy.*
- *In an effort to get to the airport on time.* We left the house at four o'clock in the morning.

Correcting -ing and to Fragments

We can correct these fragments by: (1) attaching the fragment to the complete thought that precedes or follows it, (2) adding a subject or verb to

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the fragment to make it a complete sentence, or (3) changing words as necessary to make the fragment part of the preceding sentence.

Examples of the first method:

The astronomer gazed intently through the telescope, hoping to catch a glimpse of the meteor.

In an effort to get to the airport on time, we left the house at four o'clock in the morning.

Example of the second method:

He works eight hours a day. Then he goes to class for three hours.

Example of the third method:

When we plugged in the air conditioner and turned it on, all the power went out.

Or: *We plugged in the air conditioner and turned it on, and all the power went out.*

A Note on *-ing* and *to* Fragments

> When words ending in *-ing* appear at the beginning of a word group, they may not necessarily introduce a fragment. They may be gerunds – verb forms used as nouns – as in the complete sentence, *Writing good essays can be challenging* (*Writing* is the subject of the sentence). Similarly, a word group introduced by *to* may be an infinitive that serves as the subject.

Added-Detail Fragments

Sometimes writers set aside an incomplete detail or example as if it were a complete sentence when it is not (it lacks a subject, lacks a verb, or is not a complete thought). The reason is much the same as the reason for writing *-ing* and *to* fragments – the writer thinks that the subject and verb in one sentence will serve for the next word group as well.

Some words and phrases that commonly introduce dependent-word fragments are: *after, especially, except, for example, including, and such as.*

Examples:

- All software in the store is on sale. *Except video games and cartridges.*
- Our class usually starts late. *For example, yesterday at quarter past six instead of at six o'clock.*
- Several basic courses are required for graduation. *Among them, English Composition, an introductory math course, and one general science course.*

Correcting Added-Detail Fragments

We can correct these fragments by using the same techniques that we use for *-ing* and *to* fragments: (1) attaching the fragment to the complete thought that precedes or follows it, (2) adding a subject or verb to the fragment to make it a complete sentence, or (3) changing words as necessary to make the fragment part of the preceding sentence.

Example of the first method:

All software in the store is on sale, except video games and cartridges.

Example of the second method: *Our class usually starts late. For example, yesterday it started at quarter past six instead of at six o'clock.*

Example of the third method: *Among the basic courses required for graduation are English Composition, an introductory math course, and one general science course.*

Missing-Subject Fragment

As its name suggests, the missing-subject fragment lacks a grammatical subject. Writers usually make this mistake because they unconsciously insert the subject from the previous sentence into the fragment.

Examples:

- We went to the party expecting it to be a crashing bore. *And discovered, to our surprise, that it was really fun.*

- The professor was interesting and very well-informed. *But gave demanding assignments and rarely awarded high grades.*

Correcting Missing-Subject Fragments

Two methods may be used to correct missing-subject fragments. (1) Connect the fragment to the previous sentence, so that the subject of that sentence also applies to the fragment. (2) Add a subject (which can often be a pronoun) to the fragment.

Example of first method: *We went to the party expecting it to be a crashing bore and discovered, to our surprise, that it was really fun.*

Examples of second method:

We went to the party expecting it to be a crashing bore. We discovered, to our surprise, that it was really fun.

The professor was interesting and very well-informed. However, he gave demanding assignments and rarely awarded high grades.

Adapted from Turner, R. (2011). Sentence Fragments. *The Grammar Curmudgeon*:

<http://www.grammarmudge.cityslides.com/Home.html>

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