

SENTENCE FRAGMENTS

A sentence needs three things:

- A noun (subject)
- A verb (action)
- A complete thought

WHAT IS A FRAGMENT?

Fragments are not real sentences because they lack one or more of those three criteria.

Fragment: All day on the beach. (There is no subject, verb, or complete thought here. It leaves us asking, “What happened on the beach?” “Who did it?”)

Sentence: We played all day on the beach. (Here there is a subject [we], verb [played], and complete thought.)

Some kinds of fragments may contain a subject and a verb, but still need more information to be a complete thought.

Fragment: As Jake was eating ice cream. (We have a subject [Jake] and a verb [was eating], but we are left waiting for more information because of the word “as.”)

Sentence: As Jake was eating Ice Cream, he saw his ex-girlfriend. (Now we have all three components of a sentence, so the statement makes complete sense.)

THE RANDOM PERSON TEST: COMPLETE THOUGHT

One way to test for a fragment is to ask whether or not the statement makes sense on its own. Fragments do not easily stand out when read with other sentences. Notice how the fragment in the following example seems to hide because it fits so nicely with the surrounding sentences.

Anorexia, a growing problem among teens, is a type of eating disorder. Where people starve themselves for fear of becoming overweight. Learning about this problem is the first step in preventing it.

It helps to identify fragments by looking at each sentence individually, and asking yourself if the supposed “sentence” makes sense on its own.

1. Anorexia, a growing problem among teens, is a type of eating disorder.
2. Where people starve themselves for fear of becoming overweight.
3. Learning about this problem is the first step in preventing it.

Notice how “sentence” two does not form a complete thought because of the word “where.” To fix this, it should probably be tacked on to the preceding sentence.

Here is another way to look at it: If you were to go up to a random person and state the supposed “sentence” alone, would you have said something complete and self-contained? Would the person completely understand you? Let’s say we are suspicious of the following “sentences” and want to see if one is a fragment:

I eat a lot of chocolate. Whenever I am nervous or bored.

Imagine going up to a random person and saying, “I eat a lot of chocolate.” Does that make sense? Has something complete been communicated? Yes, it makes sense standing alone. Now go up and say, “Whenever I am nervous or bored.” Have you uttered a complete thought? Could the random person make sense of what you just said? No. This is a fragment.

Note: When you apply this test, remember that pronouns can sometimes make it seem like a thought is not complete. For example: "It eats it." This is a complete sentence because it contains a subject, verb, and expresses a complete thought. Out of context, we don't know what "it" is, but a pronoun functions as a subject because it is replacing a noun.

HOW TO FIX FRAGMENTS

To correct fragments, it is necessary to add one of the three sentence criteria. Usually a subject and/or verb will complete the thought. Remember how adding a subject, and verb to this fragment corrected the sentence?

Incomplete: All day on the beach.

Corrected: We played all day on the beach.

Remember how our trial "sentence" two didn't form a complete thought, and so we considered tacking it on to the preceding sentence? This is a great way to fix most fragments by combining them with the sentence that comes before or after.

Corrected: Anorexia, a growing problem among teens, is a type of eating disorder where people starve themselves for fear of becoming overweight. Learning about this problem is the first step in preventing it.

COMMON PROBLEM AREAS

Fragments are really just "chunks" of sentences that have broken off from the main sentence. A few types of sentences seem to tempt writers to make fragments.

Introductory phrases

Fragment: Walking past the house. The mailman noticed the dog was off its leash.

Corrected: Walking past the house, the mailman noticed the dog was off its leash.

"Add-on" phrases (Phrases tagged on to the end of a sentence that require a comma, not a period)

Fragment: I love reading good books. Especially when I am not assigned to read them.

Corrected: I love reading good books, especially when I am not assigned to read them.

Fragment: I felt like an outcast. Living on the edge of society.

Corrected: I felt like an outcast, living on the edge of society.

Subordinating conjunctions (see page 9 for "dependent clause words")

Fragment: Whenever I go back home. I hang out with my high school friends.

Corrected: Whenever I go back home, I hang out with my high school friends.

Fragment: I hang out with my friends from high school. Whenever I go back home.

Corrected: I hang out with my friends from high school whenever I go back home. (Simply omit the period.)

Fragment: Because I have never had good vision. I will never make a good pilot.

Corrected: Because I have never had good vision, I will never make a good pilot.

Note: Sometimes fragments are intentional. Experienced writers will sometimes use fragments for stylistic purposes. You should avoid writing a fragment, however, unless you are certain of the particular effect you are trying to create by using it.