

Avoiding Sentence Fragments

What is a "sentence fragment"?

A "sentence fragment" results when a group of words that is not a sentence is trying to pose as one. Remember that in order to be a sentence (or "complete thought" or "independent thought" or "independent clause"), a group of words must do two things: first, it must contain a subject and a complete verb; and second, it must express a complete thought. There are four types of fragments.

1. MISSING SUBJECT FRAGMENTS

Example: The pitcher gripped the baseball. Then, after seeing the batter's huge muscles, panicked and dropped it.

The second "sentence" in this example is not really a sentence at all because it is missing a subject. We can guess from context who the sentence is about (the pitcher), but the fact is that the "sentence" in question never actually tells us. Grammatically speaking, then, it is a fragment. To correct it, add a subject to the fragment to make it a sentence.

2. "-ING" AND "TO" FRAGMENTS

Example 1: I spent the whole day in my office. Trying to stay awake after a long night.

Example 2: To demonstrate what a fragment is. The teacher gave the student a handout.

In example 1, the second word group is not a sentence because we do not know who or what was trying to stay awake. Again, we can probably guess from context, but we are not told within that "sentence," so it is a fragment. To correct it, connect the second word group to the first one (which is a sentence) with a comma.

In example 2, the first word group is not a sentence. To correct the example, connect both word groups (the fragment and the sentence) with a comma.

3. ADDED-DETAIL FRAGMENTS

Example: My daughter enjoys youth sports. Such as volleyball, soccer, and softball.

The second "sentence" is obviously a fragment. It has no subject and no verb, and it does not express a complete thought; it is simply a list of things, and lists of things are not sentences. There are several ways of correcting this type of mistake, and they usually involve rewording or rewriting the fragment so that it meets the

qualifications of a sentence. Occasionally, however, simply connecting the fragment to the sentence will work—but do not depend on this method in all cases!

4. DEPENDENT-WORD FRAGMENTS

Example 1: After I dropped the hammer on my foot. I cried out in pain.

Example 2: We enjoyed ourselves at Bill’s birthday party. Which was last Sunday.

Example 3: Since the beginning of the semester. I have wanted a cheeseburger.

All of these examples include a word group which is not a sentence because it begins with a “dependent word” (see the box below for a list of some of these words.) You can correct these kinds of fragments by connecting the fragment to the sentence before or after it with a comma or sometimes by eliminating the dependent word itself. (Note: This method does not always work—and even when it does, it can result in short, choppy sentences. Sentence variety can liven up your writing and make it sound less repetitive.)

COMMON DEPENDENT WORDS