

How to form sentences

A **sentence** has to have a subject (the *doer* of the action. Or in passive voice, the *done to*), AND a verb (an action word), AND it has to form a complete thought.

A **clause** is a group of words in a sentence that contains a subject and a verb; if it forms a complete thought and could be punctuated as a sentence, we call it an independent clause, but if it does not form a complete thought, and cannot therefore stand as a sentence, we call it a dependent clause.

A **phrase** is a group of words that does **not** contain both a verb and a subject.

A **Fragment** is an error: a group of words that cannot form a sentence but is punctuated as one.

E.g. The rusty car. (NO VERB)

Or: Abandoned by the roadside. (NO SUBJECT)

A **dependent clause** has both verb and subject, but does not form a complete thought – it *depends* on an independent clause elsewhere in the sentence, and so cannot form a sentence on its own.

The element that introduces dependency is a **subordinating conjunction**. These include words and phrases like the following: *after, before, whether, if, even if, if only, rather than, because, since, when, while, as long as, as, that, so that, which, although, though, even though, unless, until, where, whereas* (NB this subordinating effect is a function of location in the sentence: sometimes some of these words can function in other ways as prepositions or adjectives (*He drove until dawn* – here “until” is a preposition).

E.g. *Although* the large blue car used a lot of petrol. (FRAGMENT – provokes the question, *it... what?*)

Although the large blue car used a lot of petrol, he used it to get to work. (COMPLEX SENTENCE -- with a **comma** following the dependent clause to link it to an independent clause).

Note: He used the large blue car to get to work although it used a lot of petrol

i.e. **no comma** when the dependent clause follows the independent clause.

An **independent clause** combines a subject and a *predicate* (the verb and its modifiers) AND it forms a complete thought.

The large blue car used a lot of petrol.

*So **SIMPLE SENTENCES** are single independent clauses separated by periods.

Jim studied hard for his exam. He passed it.

Too many of them together sound choppy and simplistic:

Jim studied hard for his exam. He passed it. He was very happy. He told his parents. They were very happy. He went out for a drink. His friends congratulated him. He went home. He was very satisfied. He slept soundly. There was a loud noise downstairs. He woke up. He got out of bed. He went down. A burglar hit him on the head with a poker. He died.

***COMPOUND SENTENCES (multiple independent clauses but no dependent clauses) joined with a range of options:**

Comma plus coordinating conjunction

Jim studied hard for his exam, **so** he passed it.

Semi-colon

Jim studied hard for his exam; he passed it.

Semi-colon plus a transitional word or phrase plus a comma

Jim studied hard for his exam; **as a result,** he passed it.

Jim studied very hard for his exam; **therefore,** he passed it.

Note: We also use semi-colons to link elements in a LIST that are complex enough have their own commas, AND to join INDEPENDENT CLAUSES linked by COORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS that themselves have commas.

She brought many things with her: marvelous toys, some made with real gold; fine foods, both familiar and unfamiliar; and strange machines fashioned of silver and platinum, their purpose obscure.

She brought many things, both strange and varied, with her; **and** all these things created an unwholesome feeling of desire to own them in the minds of those, especially young people, who saw them.

Coordinating conjunctions: For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So (use FANBOYS as a mnemonic)

Transitional phrases include the following (among many, many others): in addition, in contrast, at this time, more importantly, for example, in the same way, on the contrary, that is to say, to summarize, by all means, of course, in fact.

Transitional words include, again, among many others, the following: also, in addition, however, consequently, clearly, similarly, finally, then, furthermore, moreover, therefore, nevertheless, thus, nonetheless.

COMPLEX SENTENCES have one independent clause and at least one dependent clause. We already saw one above when discussing dependency. Here's another:

Whereas Violet-Elizabeth only had to hear a piece of music once to be able to play it, William had to study every note for days.

In this case "whereas" subordinates the first clause, requiring it to be joined to an independent clause to form a sentence. Reverse the order of the clauses and the need for a comma between them disappears:

William had to study every note for days whereas Violet-Elizabeth only had to hear a piece of music once to be able to play it.

***Good writing mixes all these types of sentences:**

Abandoned by the roadside, the large rusty car looked a little forlorn. Jim stared down the road. Although the desert sun was low in the sky, it was still as hot as the inside of a furnace, and the two-lane highway seemed to disappear into a shimmering nothingness long before it reached the horizon. He would never reach the exam hall in time now, he thought. At that moment, William and Violet-Elizabeth pulled up in their gleaming Audi. "Need a ride?" asked William.

EXTRA: Comma rules

1. Use a comma between independent clauses followed by a coordinating conjunction.

Jim was stranded in the desert, and he was late for his exam.

2. Use a comma after introductory elements such as a) clauses, b) phrases, or c) words that come before the main (or independent) clause.

Stranded in the desert, Jim stared into the shimmering haze.

3. Use a pair of commas in the middle of a sentence to set off an element that is *inessential* to the meaning of the sentence

The tall young man, a student at the College of the Desert, stood at the roadside exuding hopelessness.

Contrast with this, in which the "who drive cars" part is *essential*.

People who drive cars must expect to break down occasionally.

4. Use to separate three or more words, phrases, or clauses written in a series.

He brought the beer, the cheezies, and the dips.

Contrast with: She brought the wine and the chips.

Also: He wished for a change in the weather, a change in his social life, and a change in his grades at school.

5. Use commas to separate two or more “coordinate” adjectives that modify the same noun. *Don’t* use between *non - coordinate* adjectives. What’s the difference? Coordinate adjectives can be swapped in order, or linked with an “and” and still make sense, whereas non-coordinate adjectives cannot. NOTE: *Don’t* put a comma between the last adjective and the noun it is describing.

She was a pretty, clever girl [can swap order and can insert “and”: She was a clever, pretty girl or “She was a pretty and clever girl”]. Contrast with He had a big red car [can’t swap order or use “and”: ~~He had a red big car. He had a big and red car~~].

Note: This arises because adjectives do have a prescribed order according to a simple set of classifications:

1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
Opinion	Size	Shape	Age	Colour	Proper adjective: e.g. Chinese	Material	Purpose

So you *would* write, “It was an attractive Canadian tool box. **NOT**, ~~“It was a Canadian tool attractive box.”~~ Adjectives from the same classification are “coordinate” so you use commas to write about a square, smooth-cornered box [both “shape”], or about a huge, bloated ego [both “size”].

6. Use a comma near the end of a sentence to separate *contrasted* coordinate elements or to indicate a *pause* or *shift*.

The car was smooth and gleaming, although ugly.

He should have expected problems, shouldn’t he?

7. Use to set off phrases at the end of the sentence that refer to the beginning or middle of the sentence. These are “free modifiers” that can moved around in the sentence without causing confusion.

The car slid effortlessly across the vast plain of the desert, rumbling gently.

Could have been: The car, rumbling gently, slid effortlessly across the vast plain of the desert; or, Rumbling gently, the car slid effortlessly across the vast plain of the desert.

8. Use between elements of geographical places (except number and street) and dates (except month and day).

He was born at 13 Barncliffe Drive, Sheffield, England on January 22, 1962.