

Sentence Construction

Sentences serve as the basic units of written communication and the building blocks of a paragraph. A well-written sentence presents a complete idea or concept with enough clarity to stand on its own. “The grammatically complete sentence is independent, contains a subject and a predicate, and is properly constructed” (Kane, 2000, p. 152). Proper construction of sentences lies at the heart of clear written communication. The subject of a sentence is the noun (person, place, or thing) doing or being something, and the predicate holds the main verb that identifies what the subject is doing or its state of being. Beginning with a capital letter and ending with a punctuation mark, a sentence is identified as one of four different kinds based on the type of punctuation mark ending the sentence.

- A *declarative* sentence makes a statement and ends in a period.
- An *interrogative* sentence poses a question and ends in a question mark.
- An *exclamatory* sentence expresses strong feelings, emotion, or surprise and ends in an exclamation mark.
- An *imperative* sentence, generally having the understood subject of “you,” communicates a request or command and often ends in a period but can end with an exclamation mark if the context is urgent or forceful.

Types of Sentences

The four sentence types are structured to achieve specific purposes. *Simple sentences* attract attention with a clear and concise message. *Compound sentences* make connections and draw comparisons by showing the relationships within the clauses that comprise the sentence. *Complex sentences* reflect relationships and reveal priorities among the subjects within the sentence. *Compound-complex sentences* convey multiple layers of information.

- A **simple sentence** consists of a single independent clause that contains a subject and a verb and attracts attention with a clear and concise message: “The woman boarded the airplane.” In this example, “The woman” is the subject, and “boarded the airplane” is the predicate. Adding descriptive elements—modifiers, phrases, and clauses— makes the sentence more engaging, interesting, and informative for the reader. Consider the following expanded sentence: “The visibly concerned woman quickly boarded the crowded airplane, knowing her son might be in danger.” In this example, the adjective “concerned” describes “the woman,” the adverb “quickly” describes how she “boarded,” the adjective “crowded” describes “the airplane,” and the modifying clause further describes her state of mind. Adding these descriptive elements does not change the simple sentence into a compound or complex sentence.
- A **compound sentence** makes connections and draws comparisons by showing the relationships within the clauses that comprise the sentence. It is formed by combining two or more independent clauses with coordinating conjunctions (e.g., *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *for*, *so*, and *yet*). The clauses that are joined together are considered to have equal grammatical weight or value within the overall sentence. This type of sentence also helps prevent chopiness in writing that can result from successive simple sentences. “The

woman boarded the airplane, but she left her laptop back at the gate.” In this example, “The woman boarded the airplane” and “she left her laptop back at the gate” are independent clauses. Each **independent clause can stand alone as a complete sentence**: “The woman boarded the airplane. She left her laptop back at the gate.”

- A **complex sentence** reflects relationships and reveals priorities among the subjects within the sentence. It encompasses multiple subjects and verbs and is constructed by joining an independent clause and a dependent clause. A **dependent, or subordinate, clause has a subject and a predicate but does not communicate a complete idea**. A dependent clause usually begins with a **subordinating conjunction** (e.g., *although, after, before, because, how, if, once, since, so that, until, unless, when, whenever, and while*) or **relative pronoun** (e.g., *which, that, whose, whoever, whomever, who, and whom*), which results in the clause being unable to stand on its own in expressing a complete thought. Examine the following complex sentence: “The children refused to go with her because they were worried.” In this example, “The children refused to go with her” is an independent clause; “**because** they were worried” is a dependent clause, because it fails to communicate a complete thought or idea and is classified as a dependent clause due to the subordinating conjunction “because.” In the case of a relative pronoun forming a dependent clause, consider the following sentence: “The police turned over evidence that they discovered after his testimony.” In this example, “The police turned over evidence” is an independent clause; “**that** they discovered after his testimony” is a dependent clause that cannot stand alone.
- Sentence construction using two independent clauses and one or more dependent clauses yields a **compound-complex sentence** and serves to convey multiple layers of information. In the following example of a compound-complex sentence, the introductory dependent clause begins with a subordinating conjunction: “Although the students want political change, they have grown to distrust the media, and the result has been a decline in student voter turnout.” In this example, “Although the students want political change” is the dependent clause. “They have grown to distrust the media” and “the result has been a decline in student voter turnout” are the independent clauses. Attempting to compose compound-complex sentences, without having mastered the simple, compound, and complex sentences, often leads to lengthy fragments and awkwardly phrased run-on sentences.

Streamline the Phrasing for Clarity

Lengthy clauses and phrases separating your subjects and verbs tend to weaken sentence structure and may result in unclear meanings for the reader. Excessive wording contributes to run-on sentences. Always isolate the **simple sentence** within the larger sentence to determine if the intended message is still coming across clearly to the reader once the descriptive elements are added. After identifying the simple sentence and its intended message, notice the **'word-distance' between subject and verb**. The longer it takes readers to “arrive” at the main verb of the sentence, the greater the likelihood of their being distracted from the main message, especially when the phrasing is unclear or the compound-complex sentence is improperly punctuated. To **streamline the phrasing and improve the clarity**, consider condensing the

wording and repositioning some of the subject modifiers as an introductory clause as two remedies toward improving the sentence structure. Examine the sentences below and note the effect that lengthy phrasing and excessive wording can have on clarity. Then, compare it with the proposed revision that restructures the sentence for greater clarity.

- **Original sentence:** **Students** in the middle school grades who are struggling in the subjects of math and science, especially in the area of critical thinking, **are discovering** that the lack of in-person instruction resulting from the pandemic has caused a significant decrease in the required reasoning skills needed to perform well in these subject areas. ('word-distance'=22)
- **Revision:** As to the pandemic's impact on their critical thinking skills, middle school **students** struggling in math and science **are discovering** that reduced in-person instruction decreased the reasoning skills needed to do well in these subjects. ('word-distance'=5)

In each of the sentences, the simple sentence remains "Students are discovering." However, notice the difference in the 'word-distance' between subject and verb and its effect on overall clarity. By streamlining the phrasing and re-structuring the sentence, the intended message will be communicated more effectively and efficiently.

Vary the Sentence Type to Introduce Variety

During the revision stage, look back over lengthier sentences and assess the opportunities to improve the sentence structure with more concise wording, or to revise as two or more sentences. This will assure that the subjects and main verbs communicate the intended message clearly to the reader. Look for those opportunities to **vary the sentence type and lengths to introduce variety into your writing** that will serve to engage and maintain the reader's attention. "Variety in the length and the structure of sentences usually makes writing more effective" (Kierzek & Gibson, 1977, p. 443). Recall that the various sentence types are structured to achieve specific purposes. As you develop paragraphs, carefully consider your chief purpose in composing sentences to support the topic sentences and overall thesis statement. This will greatly improve the clarity, fluency, and precision in communicating your message to the reader.

Practice

Identify the following sentences as simple (S), compound (C), complex (Cx), or compound-complex (CC) sentence types.


1. Kevin loaded the luggage into the trunk.
2. Seven children boarded the train, and the conductor allowed each of them to blow the whistle.
3. Dogs and cats followed the smell of bacon because they were hungry.
4. Theaters across the country were once again full of movie fans in line for popcorn.
5. The paramedics transported all the survivors whom they discovered after the floodwaters receded.

6. Although the debate team won the first round, they knew their next arguments were not supported by enough evidence, and the visiting team quickly realized that this was the opportunity to win.
7. Activists lobbied for changes in the current laws since the shop owner was arrested.
8. Teachers fought hard to raise the requirements for reading and writing, but administration yielded to the school board's decision to leave policies unchanged.
9. People demanded freedom for the captives.
10. When frustration reaches a certain level, oppressed people demand to be heard, and the resulting reforms bring about freedom.
11. The campaign trail became crowded with candidates who were ambivalent about education standards.
12. Football and basketball remain the most popular sports among college athletes.
13. Writers flooded the auditorium to hear advice from the famous author, and they were not disappointed when the author began reading from her latest unpublished manuscript.
14. Migratory birds often travel hundreds of miles per day, and the primary reasons for their travels are food and nesting locations.
15. Water remained scarce, so rationing became necessary.

Answers: 1. S 2. C 3. Cx 4. S 5. Cx 6. CC 7. Cx 8. C 9. S 10. CC 11. Cx 12. S 13. CC 14. C 15. C

References

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- Kierzek, J. M., & Gibson, W. (1977). *The Macmillan handbook of English* (R. Wilson, Jr., Ed.; 6th ed.). Macmillan Publishing Co.

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