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Sentence Structure and Troubleshooting Common Errors

Run-on sentences, sentence fragments, comma splices, and missing words are all types of sentences structure errors. A sentence structure error occurs when the grammatical structure of a sentence is incorrect in some way. Sentence structure errors are global in nature, which means they can interfere with your audience's understanding of a clause, a sentence or a whole section of your paper. Therefore, they are highly noticeable. This is particularly true in academic writing, where authors are expected to have a strong command of sentence structure.

*Several types of problems can result in the above-mentioned errors. Two of the most common of these are **missing clause elements** and **incorrect structure of compound and complex sentences**. This handout is designed to familiarize you with some fundamentals of English clause and sentence structure and to then help you use this information in order to recognize and correct the above-mentioned sentence structure errors.*

Independent and Dependent Clauses

The **clause** is the basic building block of the English sentence. All clauses must contain at least a **subject** (S) and a **verb** (V). A clause can be **independent** or **dependent**. If it is independent, it can stand as a sentence all by itself. Examples of independent clauses include the following:

The cause of the problem is not completely clear.

S V

The answer lies in the details.

S V

The essay has several strengths.

S V

If the clause is dependent, then its meaning is not complete without the presence of an accompanying independent clause. Below are examples of dependent clauses:

which I will discuss in the next section

S V

although the argument is poorly developed

S V

after one has read the entire essay

S V

if we examine the author's second argument carefully

S V

As previously stated, whether independent or dependent, all clauses must contain a subject and a verb. As can be seen in the above examples—the **subject** of a clause, whether a single word or a phrase, always has a noun or pronoun as its central element. In addition, the **verb** in a clause generally expresses action or existence.

In addition to subjects and verbs, the specific language you choose may make other sentence elements necessary. For example, some verbs require **direct** or **indirect objects**. To say someone “took” does not make sense without a direct object, or the thing that was taken. And to say someone “gave” does not usually make sense without clarifying what was given (the direct object) and to whom it was given (the indirect object).

Linking verbs, such as *BE, feel, look, appear, seem, smell, and grow*, are verbs which indicate current states or outcomes. Linking verbs require **complements** in order to complete their meanings. For example, to say something “seems” does not make sense without saying how that thing seems.

Prepositions generally precede nouns or pronouns to create adverbial or adjective phrases may be necessary in order to complete the meaning of certain verbs or adverbial expressions. For example, the verb “deal” takes on a whole new meaning when combined with the preposition “with,” and the adverbial “in spite” requires the preposition “of” in order to be used correctly.

Adjectives modify nouns or pronouns. For example, an adjective allows you to refer to a “powerful supporting point” rather than just a “supporting point.”

Adverbial words and phrases, which tell us degree, duration, frequency, manner, place, time and position, while not structurally required, may be necessary in order to express the particular meaning of the verb or adjective you want to convey. For example, to say an author “argues his point *convincingly*” is quite different than simply saying that he “argues his point.”

Prepositions combine with certain nouns and pronouns in order to create adverb and adjective phrases. For example in the sentence, “She uses a variety *of* arguments *in* this essay,” *of arguments* is an adjective phrase that modifies *variety* and *in this essay* is an adverb phrase that modifies *uses*.

Finally, **articles** may be necessary to make your sentence structurally sound. The indefinite articles *a* and *an* indicate a singular count noun, such as in the sentence, “She offered a strong set of arguments.” The definite article *the* has a variety of uses. These include the following:

- a. indicating that a noun has been previously mentioned or alluded to and is therefore specific
e.g. “His essay contains three flaws. The first (flaw) is its short length.
- b. accompanying proper nouns e.g. “The Oxford English Dictionary offers comprehensive definitions.”
- c. accompanying superlatives e.g. “This is the best argument I’ve encountered.”

Types of Sentences

There are four main types of sentences: simple, compound, complex and compound-complex. Each has a different structural pattern, but all include at least one independent clause.

a. Simple Sentences

A sentence with a single independent clause is called a simple sentence. Examples of simple sentences are the following:

The author’s claim is very interesting
 S V C

She includes several arguments to support her point of view.
S V DO ADV

b. Compound Sentences

A sentence that consists of at least two independent clauses is called a compound sentence. Compound sentences combine two independent clauses in one of two ways. The first is with a comma and a **coordinating conjunction** (CC). The coordinating conjunctions are *and, but, for, nor, so, yet*. The second way to combine two independent clauses into a

compound sentence is with a semicolon followed by a **transition** (T), e.g. *however, nevertheless, as a result*. Below are examples of compound sentences.

The author's claim is very interesting, but it is ultimately not convincing.

S V C CC S V C

She includes various arguments to support her view; however, some contain flaws.

S V DO ADV T S V DO

c. Complex Sentences

The third type of sentence, the complex sentence, consists of an independent clause and at least one dependent clause. Dependent clauses are linked to independent clauses with **subordinating conjunctions** (SC). There are many types of subordinating conjunctions, which indicate the nature of the relationship between the independent and dependent clause. Below are some examples of complex sentences.

Although the author's claim is very interesting, it is ultimately not convincing.

SC S V C S V C

After I had read all of her arguments, I thought up some better ones.

SC S V DO S V DO

d. Compound-Complex Sentences

The fourth, and final, type of sentence is the compound-complex sentence. A compound-complex sentence consists of at least two independent clauses and at least one dependent clause. Below are some examples.

The author's claim is very interesting, but because it lacks clarity, it is ultimately not

convincing.

S V C CC SC S V DO S V C

Common Sentence Structure Errors and Trouble-shooting Your Work

Several types of sentence structure errors can be corrected by applying the above knowledge.

Missing Words: Student writers are frequently told that words are missing from their sentences. Using what you know about sentence elements you can ask yourself some questions to help troubleshoot your work.

1. Does each clause have a subject and a verb?
2. Does the verb require a complement, a direct object and/or an indirect object?
3. Is a preposition needed before a noun to complete its adverb or adjective meaning?
4. Are indefinite articles present before single count nouns and are definite articles included before specific or proper nouns or superlatives?

Fragments: A fragment is a group of words that has been punctuated as a sentence but is not a complete sentence. When you are told you have a sentence fragment problem ask yourself the following questions.

1. Does the sentence contain an independent clause? That is, does it contain a subject and verb and can it stand alone?

2. If not, can you combine it with a nearby sentence to create a sentence with an independent clause, or can you modify the sentence to include an independent clause?

Run-on Sentences: Run-on sentences are independent clauses that have been incorrectly combined in a sentence. This is usually done in one of two ways, either by simply placing the two independent clauses in sequence, or by linking them with a comma. This last type of run-on sentence is termed a *comma splice*. Ask yourself the following questions to find the problem and correct it.

1. Are the independent clauses combined with a proper connecting word, either with a coordinating conjunction or a transition word?
2. Is the point of connection properly punctuated? Is there a comma before the coordinating conjunction, or is there a semicolon before a transition and a comma after it?

Exercise.

Summarize what the reader has learned. Explain its importance for future work.

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