



# Sentence Fragments

Sentence fragments are grammatically incomplete sentences. While fragments are often found in advertising and informal writing, they are considered a serious problem in academic and business writing. This handout explains what a sentence fragment is and how to identify fragments. The overview on identifying sentence fragments is accompanied by a challenge exercise. This handout also provides strategies for revising fragments and reviews common sentence patterns that often result in fragmentary sentences. Each section includes examples to demonstrate the principles and strategies covered in the handout.

## What is a Sentence Fragment?

A sentence is fragmented when it is missing a subject, verb or object.

Below are three examples of sentence fragments.

**Example sentence 1:** “Runs through the forest.”

In this example the sentence is fragmented because it is missing a subject. A subject is a noun, pronoun or noun phrase that performs the action in a sentence.

**Example sentence 2:** “The girl in the class.”

In this example the sentence is fragmented because it is missing a main verb. A main verb is the primary action in a sentence which is performed by the subject of the sentence.

**Example sentence 3:** “I like.”

In this example the sentence is fragmented because it is missing an object. An object is a noun or a pronoun that is acted upon by a verb or a preposition.

## Typical Fragment Patterns

There are certain sentence patterns that can result in the creation of sentence fragments. Here are a few patterns that can lead to fragmentary sentences. For each pattern there will be an example of the fragment and an example of a corrected version of the sentence.

## **Pattern 1: Starting a sentence with “which” or “in which”**

### **Fragment example:**

“The spill killed virtually all aquatic life in a 400-metre stretch of the Tisza River. Which is home to 19 of the 29 species of protected fish in Hungary.”

In the example above, the following sentence is fragmentary: “Which is home to 19 of the 29 species of protected fish in Hungary”. Below is a possible correction for this sentence.

### **Corrected sentence:**

“The spill killed virtually all aquatic life in a 400-metre stretch of the Tisza River, which is home to 19 of the 29 species of protected fish in Hungary.”

In the example above, the fragment was corrected by attaching the fragment to the preceding sentence with a comma.

**Note:** It is permissible to start a sentence with “which” if the sentence is a question.

**Example:** “Which river is home to 19 of the 29 species of protected fish in Hungary?”

## **Pattern 2: Starting a sentence with “for example”**

### **Fragment example:**

“Viruses are resistant to antibiotics. For example, the common cold and flu viruses.”

In the example above, the following sentence is fragmentary: “For example, the common cold and flu viruses.” Here is a possible correction for this sentence:

### **Corrected sentence:**

“Viruses, such as the common cold and flu viruses, are resistant to antibiotics.”

In the example above, the fragment was corrected by combining the two sentences. However, it is permissible to start a sentence with “for example” if a complete thought follows that opening. Here is an example that corrects the fragment while still beginning the second sentence with “for example”:

“Viruses are resistant to antibiotics. For example, penicillin is ineffective against flu viruses.”

### **Pattern 3: Starting a sentence with “although”**

#### **Fragment example:**

“This was the most serious cyanide spill ever. Although there have been other serious spills.”

In the example above, the following sentence is fragmentary: “Although there have been other serious spills.” Here is a possible correction for this sentence:

#### **Corrected sentence:**

“This was the most serious cyanide spill ever, although there have been other serious spills.”

In the example above, the fragmentary sentence was corrected by attaching the fragment to the preceding sentence with a comma.

### **Pattern 4: Using participles instead of a main verb in a sentence**

#### **Fragment example:**

Many universities are seeking private sector funding. Budget cutbacks being one reason.

In the example above, the following sentence is fragmentary: “Budget cutbacks being one reason.”. This is because the participle “being” cannot act as the main verb of a sentence. Here is a possible correction for this sentence:

#### **Corrected sentence:**

“Many universities are seeking private sector funding. Budget cutbacks are one reason.”

In the example above, the sentence fragment was corrected by replacing the participle “being” with a verbal form of “be”. In this case, the plural form of the verb “be” (“are”) is used to match the plural subject of the sentence (“budget cutbacks”).

## **Strategy for Identifying Sentence Fragments**

If you suspect a sentence to be fragmentary, you can try the following strategy to help determine if your sentence is really a fragment:

Test your sentence by writing “It is true that” before your suspected fragment. If the sentence makes sense, you have a complete sentence; if something seems missing, you probably have a fragment in need of revision. (Note that this strategy does not work with questions.)

On the next page are two examples of this strategy.

### Example 1:

**Suspected fragment:** The dog is large.

**Test:** It is true that the dog is large.

**Conclusion:** The test sentence is complete and makes sense. Therefore “the dog is large” is **not** a sentence fragment.

### Example 2:

**Suspected fragment:** I like.

**Test:** It is true that I like.

**Conclusion:** The test sentence is not complete and seems to be missing information (in this case it is not clear what I like). Therefore “I like” is a sentence fragment.

## Challenge Exercise

Try to find the six fragments in the following passage. If you’re not sure whether a sentence is fragmentary, use the strategy above to test for fragments.

### Challenge passage:

Sentence fragments are incomplete sentences that lack a main clause. Because they do not express a complete thought. Writers sometimes use them intentionally for emphasis or style. Especially in creative writing or informal speech. However, in formal writing, fragments can be confusing or distracting. Missing either a subject or a verb. It's important to recognize when a sentence is not structurally complete. Such as after editing a longer sentence. To correct a fragment, you usually need to attach it to a nearby sentence or add the missing parts. Even though it might seem tricky. Learning to recognize and correct sentence fragments will make you a stronger writer.

## Challenge Exercise Key

How did you do on the exercise? Compare your answers to the following key. There are six sentence fragments in the passage. In the key, the six fragments appear in **bold** type. The six sentence fragments will also be listed, following the passage.

## Challenge passage key

Sentence fragments are incomplete sentences that lack a main clause. **Because they do not express a complete thought.** Writers sometimes use them intentionally for emphasis or style. **Especially in creative writing or informal speech.** However, in formal writing, fragments can be confusing or distracting. **Missing either a subject or a verb.** It's important to recognize when a sentence is not structurally complete. **Such as after editing a longer sentence.** To correct a fragment, you usually need to attach it to a nearby sentence or add the missing parts. **Even though it might seem tricky.** Learning to recognize and correct sentence fragments will make you a stronger writer.

## Sentence fragments occurring in the passage

1. Because they do not express a complete thought.
2. Especially in creative writing or informal speech.
3. Missing either a subject or a verb.
4. Such as after editing a longer sentence.
5. Even though it might seem tricky.

## Two Strategies for Fixing Fragments

Using the “It is true that” test, we can see if something seems missing in a fragmentary sentence. Once you have identified a sentence fragment, you can fix the problem using one of the following two strategies. Each strategy will be accompanied by an example referring to a cyanide spill in the Tisza river.

### Strategy 1:

Attach the fragment to an adjoining sentence with a comma.

#### Example:

“The scale of the resulting ecological disaster was vast. Killing virtually all aquatic life in a 400-metre stretch of the Tisza River.”

#### Correction:

“The scale of the resulting ecological disaster was vast, killing virtually all aquatic life in a 400-metre stretch of the Tisza River.”

## Strategy 2:

Rewrite the fragment so that it passes the “It is true that” sentence test.

**Hint:** Identify the main action and try starting the sentence with the “doer” of that action.

### Example:

“The scale of the resulting ecological disaster was vast. Killing virtually all aquatic life in a 400-metre stretch of the Tisza River.”

### Correction:

“The scale of the resulting ecological disaster was vast. The **spill** killed virtually all aquatic life in a 400-metre stretch of the Tisza River.”

## Using Fragments Strategically

Once you are confident with identifying and fixing fragments you may find them useful in certain types of writing. Fragments can be a powerful tool in writing for emphasis and building tone. If you plan on using a fragment in your writing you must be confident that its placement will add to the writing rather than hinder it, which is why many choose to avoid them. Some situations where you might consider a fragment are:

- Writing dialogue in creative work
- Establishing a personal voice in reflections
- Emphasizing a point the reader must remember

**Note:** While the above are instances where you may consider a fragment, this rhetorical device must add to the writing and flow within the work as a whole. If you are unsure about fragment placement it is best to avoid one and write a complete sentence.