

Recognizing and repairing sentence fragments

A sentence fragment is a word group that pretends to be a sentence. Sentence fragments are easy to recognize when they appear out of context, like these:

On the old wooden stool in the corner of my grandmother's kitchen.
And immediately popped their flares and life vests.

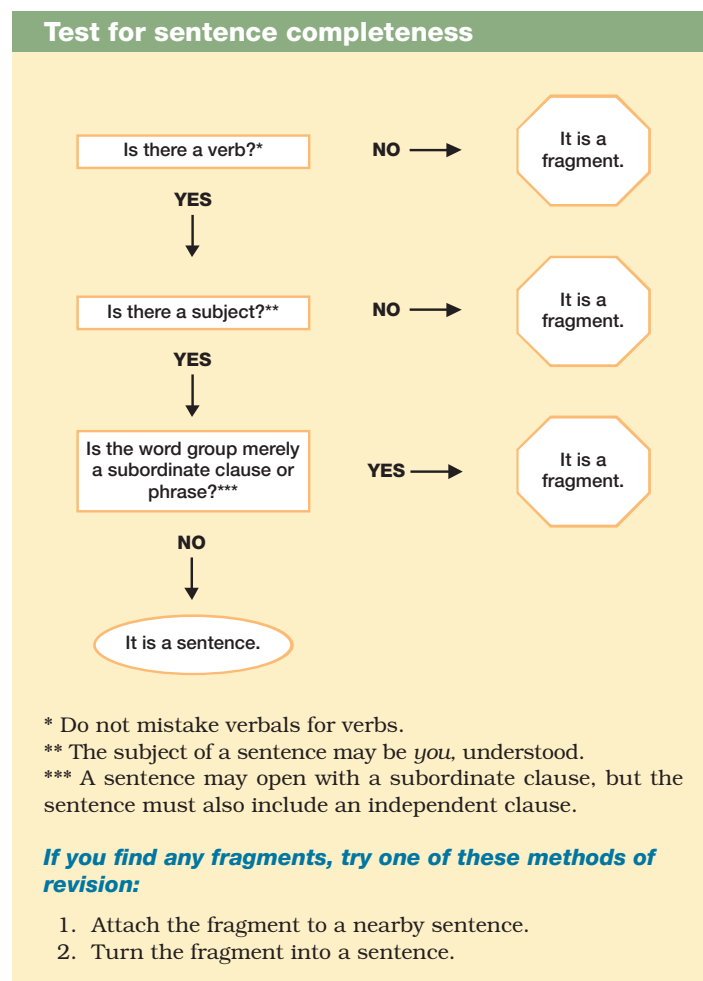
When fragments appear next to related sentences, however, they are harder to spot.

On that morning I sat in my usual spot. On the old wooden stool in the corner of my grandmother's kitchen.
The pilots ejected from the burning plane, landing in the water not far from the ship. And immediately popped their flares and life vests.

Recognizing sentence fragments

To be a sentence, a word group must consist of at least one full independent clause. An independent clause has a subject and a verb, and it either stands alone or could stand alone.

To test a word group for sentence completeness, use the flowchart below. For example, by using the flowchart, you can see exactly why *On the old wooden stool in the corner of my grandmother's kitchen* is a fragment: It lacks both a subject and a verb. *And immediately popped their flares and life vests* is a fragment because it lacks a subject.



(continued)

Repairing sentence fragments

You can repair most fragments in one of two ways: Either pull the fragment into a nearby sentence or turn the fragment into a sentence.

- ▶ On that morning I sat in my usual spot, ~~On~~ ^{on} the old wooden stool in the corner of my grandmother's kitchen.
- ▶ The pilots ejected from the burning plane, landing in the water not far from the ship. ~~And~~ ^{They} immediately popped their flares and life vests.

Attach fragmented subordinate clauses or turn them into sentences.

A subordinate clause is patterned like a sentence, with both a subject and a verb, but it begins with a word that marks it as subordinate. The following words commonly introduce subordinate clauses.

after	even though	so that	when	whom
although	how	than	where	whose
as	if	that	whether	why
as if	in order that	though	which	
because	rather than	unless	while	
before	since	until	who	

Subordinate clauses function within sentences as adjectives, as adverbs, or as nouns. They cannot stand alone.

Most fragmented clauses beg to be pulled into a sentence nearby.

- ▶ Americans have come to fear the West Nile virus, ~~Because~~ ^{because} it is transmitted by the common mosquito.

Because introduces a subordinate clause.

If a fragmented clause cannot be attached to a nearby sentence or if you feel that attaching it would be awkward, try turning the clause into a sentence. The simplest way to do this is to delete the opening word or words that mark it as subordinate.

- ▶ Population increases and uncontrolled development are taking a deadly toll on the environment. ~~So that in~~ ^{In} many parts of the world, fragile ecosystems are collapsing.

Attach fragmented phrases or turn them into sentences.

Like subordinate clauses, phrases function within sentences as adjectives, as adverbs, or as nouns. They cannot stand alone. Fragmented phrases are often prepositional or verbal phrases; sometimes they are appositives, words or word groups that rename nouns or pronouns.

Often a fragmented phrase may simply be pulled into a nearby sentence.

- ▶ The archaeologists worked slowly, ~~Examining~~ ^{examining} and labeling every pottery shard they uncovered.

The word group beginning with *Examining* is a verbal phrase.

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If a fragmented phrase cannot be pulled into a nearby sentence effectively, turn the phrase into a sentence. You may need to add a subject, a verb, or both.

- ▶ In the training session, Jamie explained how to access our new database. ^{She also taught us} ~~Also~~ how to submit expense reports and request vendor payments.

The revision turns the fragmented phrase into a sentence by adding a subject and a verb.

Attach other fragmented word groups or turn them into sentences.

Other word groups that are commonly fragmented include parts of compound predicates, lists, and examples introduced by *such as*, *for example*, or similar expressions.

- ▶ The woodpecker finch of the Galápagos Islands carefully selects a twig of a certain size and shape, ^{and} ~~And~~ then uses this tool to pry out grubs from trees.
- ▶ It has been said that there are only three indigenous American art forms: ^{musical} ~~Musical~~ comedy, jazz, and soap opera.
- ▶ In the twentieth century, the South produced some great American writers, ^{such} ~~Such~~ as Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, Alice Walker, Tennessee Williams, and Thomas Wolfe.

At times, however, it may be necessary to turn the fragment into a sentence.

- ▶ If Eric doesn't get his way, he goes into a fit of rage. For example, ^{he lies} ~~lying~~ on the floor screaming or ^{opens} ~~opening~~ the cabinet doors and then ^{slams} ~~slamming~~ them shut.

The writer corrected this fragment by adding a subject — *he* — and substituting verbs for the verbals *lying*, *opening*, and *slamming*.

Exception: Occasionally a fragment may be used deliberately, for effect.

Skilled writers occasionally use sentence fragments for special purposes, but writers and readers do not always agree on when they are appropriate. That's why you will find it safer to write in complete sentences.