

Sentence Fragments

A sentence fragment is an incomplete sentence. Some fragments are incomplete because they lack either a subject or a verb, or both. The fragments that most students have trouble with, however, are dependent clauses—they have a subject and a verb, so they look like complete sentences, but they don't express a complete thought. They're called "dependent" because they can't stand on their own (just like some people you might know who are SO dependent!). Look at these dependent clauses. They're just begging for more information to make the thoughts complete:

1. Because his car was in the shop (...What did he do?)
2. After the rain stops (...What then?)
3. When you finally take the test (...What will happen?)

Does each of these examples have a subject? Yes. Does each have a verb? Yes. So what makes the thought incomplete? It's the first word (Because, After, When, Since, If). These words belong to a special class of words called subordinators or subordinating conjunctions. If you know something about subordinating conjunctions, you can probably eliminate 90% of your fragments. First, you need to know that subordinating conjunctions do three things:

1. join two sentences together
2. make one of the sentences dependent on the other for a complete thought (make one a dependent clause)
3. indicate a logical relationship

Second, you need to recognize the subordinators when you see them. Here is a list of common subordinating conjunctions and the relationships they indicate:

- Cause / Effect: because, since, so that
- Comparison / Contrast: although, even though, though, whereas, while
- Place & Manner: how, however, where, wherever
- Possibility / Conditions: if, whether, unless
- Relation: that, which, who
- Time: after, as, before, since, when, whenever, while, until

Third, you need to know that the subordinator (and the whole dependent clause) doesn't have to be at the beginning of the sentence. The dependent clause and the independent clause can switch places, but the whole clause moves as one big chunk. Look at how these clauses switched places in the sentence:

1. Because his car was in the shop, John took the bus.
2. John took the bus because his car was in the shop.

Finally, you need to know that every dependent clause needs to be attached to an independent clause (remember, the independent clause can stand on its own).

Finding Fragments

Remember the basics: subject, verb, and complete thought. If you can recognize those things, you're halfway there. Then, scan your sentences for subordinating conjunctions.

If you find one, first identify the whole chunk of the dependent clause (the subject and verb that go with the subordinator), and then make sure they're attached to an independent clause.

1. John took the bus. (Independent clause. So far, all is well!)
2. Because his car was in the shop. (Dependent clause all by itself. Uh oh! Fragment!)
3. Sami took the bus because his car was in the shop. (Now that is okay!)