

How Do I Avoid Writing Fragments?

At its most basic, every sentence must contain two key parts of speech: a subject and a verb. What makes things confusing sometimes is the way words in English shift, with little alteration, from one part of speech to another. Nouns become verbs, modifiers, objects; verbs become nouns, modifiers, even subjects. As a result, you may think you've included a verb in a sentence, when in fact it's the subject of an incomplete sentence, a fragment.

Example:

“Running the grueling 26 miles of the Boston Marathon.” This is not a sentence, because we have yet to find out what you have to say about the sentence's subject, “running the grueling 26 miles of the Boston Marathon.” The entire phrase serves as the subject, though the simple subject is “Running”; even though it sounds like a verb, “Running” is actually the subject. A complete sentence might read: “Running the grueling 26 miles of the Boston Marathon requires discipline, ability, and courage.” The subject is the same, but now there's a verb, “requires,” and we know what you have to say about the subject.

Independent Clause vs. Dependent Clause

- ✓ A sentence stands alone and makes sense, which is why we call a sentence an independent clause.
- ✓ Clauses that lack either a subject or a verb (or both) depend on an independent clause to provide meaning; hence, they are referred to as dependent clauses.

Fragments

- ✓ Simply put, a fragment is an incomplete sentence, lacking either a subject, verb, or both.
- ✓ A fragment results from the writer not recognizing the sentence's boundaries: where the sentence actually begins or ends.
- ✓ Most fragments can be fairly easily repaired; they usually depend upon what comes before or after them for their meaning.

Fragments usually fall into one of four categories:

1. Verbal Fragments

As mentioned earlier, parts of speech often masquerade, doing double and triple-duty in the language:

- ✓ The Boston Marathon example above illustrates how the verb “to run” can become the gerund (or noun) “running.”
- ✓ “Running the grueling 26 miles of the Boston Marathon” can also be a participle (or modifier), as in this example: “Running the grueling 26 miles of the Boston Marathon, an athlete learns the absolute limits of physical and emotional endurance.” Here, the verbal phrase isn’t the subject of the sentence; rather it modifies (or describes) the sentence’s subject, which is “athlete.”

There is another type of verbal fragment: the infinitive:

- ✓ “To be or not to be,” says Hamlet. Yet if he had stopped there, he’d have created an infinitive fragment. The full sentence reads, “To be or not to be: that is the question.”
- ✓ Returning to our Boston Marathon example, an infinitive fragment might look like this: “To run the grueling 26 miles of the Boston Marathon.”
- ✓ Proper execution of the sentence might take the form of a subject: “To run the grueling 26 miles of the Boston Marathon requires discipline, ability, and courage.”
- ✓ Or it may take the form of a modifier: “To run the grueling 26 miles of the Boston Marathon, an athlete must be very dedicated and maybe even a little bit crazy.”

Examples:

Verbal Fragments:

- *Worried about her mother’s doctor bills.* Beth finally called her uncle for help.
- We had to stop at the post office first. *To mail a wedding present to my cousin.*

Corrections:

- Worried about her mother’s doctor bills, Beth finally called her uncle for help.
- We had to stop at the post office first, to mail a wedding present to my cousin.

2. Prepositional Fragments

- ✓ This is a simple problem with a simple solution.

- ✓ A prepositional fragment most often can take its place as part of the preceding sentence.

Examples:

Prepositional Fragments

- No one remembered Ralph's birthday. *Except his brother.*
- Karen sent me a memo. *About the meeting next Tuesday.*

Corrections:

- No one remembered Ralph's birthday except his brother.
- Karen sent me a memo about the meeting next Tuesday.

3. Noun/Modifier Fragments

- ✓ Another occasional problem crops up when the subject of the sentence is modified by a descriptive clause.
- ✓ The adjective clause usually features a verb (indicated in **bold**) that a writer may mistake as the verb belonging to the subject.

Examples:

Noun/Modifier Fragments

- *The bus that **stops** at 8:00 am.*
- *The refrigerator that **is** on sale at Sears this week.*

Corrections:

- The bus that stops at 8:00 am is always filled to capacity.
- The refrigerator that is on sale at Sears this week is out of stock.

4. Subordinate Fragments:

- ✓ Any subordinate, modifying clause is a dependent clause; if it stands alone, it's a fragment.
- ✓ The solution is most often to connect the dependent or subordinate clause to the independent clause on which the subordinate clause depends for its meaning.

Examples:

Subordinate Fragments:

- I will write in complete sentences. *Once I understand this fragment thing.*
- Tom cleaned his desk and found the book. *Which belongs to Jan.*

Corrections:

- Once I understand this fragment thing, I will write in complete sentences.
- Tom cleaned his desk and found the book, which belongs to Jan.

You've seen the way fragments usually crop up. Now take a look at an entire paragraph, riddled with fragments, and try to gauge how many you would recognize without italics:

Last Friday, my husband and I drove to the shore. *Our neighbors who spend most weekends at their beach house on the beach.* We had loaded our car on Thursday evening. *With food, clothes, beach chairs, and rubber rafts. No tents or sleeping bags. Because we have been invited to stay in their house.* When we arrived, we found the beach house empty. The Laurences had forgotten about us. *And gone back to the city.* We realized that we were not prepared to camp out, so we went for a swim. *And then returned home, disappointed and a little angry.* (Adapted from Mackie & Rompf, Building Sentences).

The "sentences" in italics aren't really sentences at all. They depend upon what is around them for any meaning they have. Reading the paragraph as a whole, you may not see or "hear" the fragments, but try reading only one of the italicized clauses.

Here is one way to repair the fragments:

Last Friday, my husband and I drove to the shore. Several weeks ago, we had been invited to spend the weekend with the Laurences, *our neighbors who spend most weekends at their house on the beach.* We had loaded our car on Thursday evening *with food, clothes, beach chairs, and rubber rafts, but not tents or sleeping bags, because we had been invited to stay in their house.* When we arrived, we found the beach house empty. The Laurences had forgotten about us *and gone back to the city.* We realized that we were not prepared to camp out, so we went for a swim and then returned home, *disappointed and a little angry.*

Remember that, while you know what you mean to say, you'll sometimes miss problems in your own writing because it is too familiar to you. For that reason, it's good to experiment in whatever ways you can with making your writing less familiar before you evaluate it. If you know you have problems with writing fragments, try reading the sentences randomly, or reading them in reverse order—whatever works for you. Don't try to revise as soon as you've written something, or else read it aloud, show it to a friend, or bring it to the ARC.