Identifying Complete Sentences

Complete sentences

To be classified as a complete sentence, a clause (a group of words) must contain a subject and a verb and express a complete thought.

Example: *Dogs bark.*

This is as simple as a sentence gets, but it contains the minimum requirement to be a complete sentence. Most sentences convey more information than this: for example, objects and modifiers.

Examples: *Every day, the dog barks at **the mailman.*** (object)

*The dog barks **loudly** at the mailman*. (modifier)

Fragments

A fragment is a group of words thought to be a sentence; usually, they lack either the subject or the verb.

Examples: *Every day, the dog at the mailman.* (no verb)

Every day, barks at the mailman. (no subject)

These examples are very basic. More often, fragments are dependent clauses pretending to be complete sentences. These clauses contain both subject and verb but do not express a complete thought.

Example: ***When** the dog barks at the mailman.*

This leaves the question "What happens when the dog barks at the mailman?"

Despite the subject and a verb, because of the word "when", it is not a complete sentence. It is a **dependent clause** and must be joined to an **independent clause** to be a complete sentence.

Example: ⌷*When the dog barks at the mailman, **the neighbours become annoyed.***

This is done with a subordinating conjunction or a relative pronoun.

Subordinating conjunctions: *while, when, after, since, because, etc.*

Relative pronouns: *that, which, who, whom, whose.*

Any of the above words appearing with a single clause signals a sentence fragment.

Comma splice

A comma splice is two complete sentences joined only by a comma.

Example: *The dog barks at the mailman, the neighbours become annoyed.*

There are four ways to correct comma splices. (See the B.U. Writing Centre *How To Fix A Comma Splice* handout.)

1. Make it into two complete sentences by adding a period and a capital letter.
   Example: *The dog barks at the mailman. The neighbours become annoyed.*
2. Add a semicolon if the two sentences are closely related.
   Example: *The dog barks at the mailman; the neighbours become annoyed.*
3. Add a comma and a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so).
   Example: *The dog barks at the mailman, **but** the neighbours become annoyed.*
4. Add a subordinating conjunction.
   Example: *The neighbours become annoyed **because** the dog barks at the mailman.*

Fused sentences

A fused sentence is similar to a comma splice except no punctuation is used to join the sentences. The methods of correction are the same.

Example: *The dog barks at the mailman the neighbours become annoyed.*

Checking for complete sentences

The easiest way to check your sentence structure is to identify the subject and the verb in each clause. To do this, first identify the verb (the word that conveys the action or state of being). Then identify the subject by creating a question using who or what and the verb.

Example: *Who barks? The dog. The dog is the subject.*
Who becomes annoyed? The neighbours. The neighbours is the subject.

If you are having trouble identifying the verb, there is a simple test. Change the tense of the sentence. The word that changes form is the verb.

Example: *Every day the dog barks…*
Yesterday, the dog barked… The verb is "bark."

Example: *Last week, I walked to school every day.*
Next week, I will walk to school every day. The verb is "walked."

Finally, check for subordinating conjunctions or relative pronouns that indicate the clause is not complete on its own.