Rules for Finding and Fixing Sentence Fragments

Recognize the difference between a sentence and a fragment.

A *fragment* resembles a *sentence* in two ways. Both groups of words begin with a capital letter and conclude with an end mark—usually a period [**.**] but sometimes a question mark [**?**] or an exclamation point [**!**].

The one important difference is that a fragment does not contain a *main clause*. Like an engine, the main clause powers a complete sentence, propelling the reader through the development of an idea. A fragment, missing this essential component, stalls on the page.

When you analyze a group of words looking for the main clause, you have to find three things: a *subject*, a *verb*, and a complete thought. If one of these three items is missing, a fragment results.

Here are examples of fragments:

And yawned loudly enough to make everyone in class turn around.

Subject = Ø; verb = *yawned*; complete thought = Ø.

The boy sitting on the fire escape, dropping water balloons on the pedestrians below.

Subject = *boy*; verb = Ø; complete thought = Ø.

After Gabriel ate half a box of donuts.

Subject = *Gabriel*; verb = *ate*; complete thought = Ø.

Know how to identify the *type* of fragment that you have found.

You can correct a *fragment* two ways: 1) adding the necessary *main clause* or 2) connecting the fragment to a main clause already in the passage. Whether you add or connect, you must use the right punctuation.

Some fragments, for example, will require a *comma* if you connect them at the *beginning* of a main clause. If you choose to connect them at the *end*, however, these same fragments require no punctuation at all. Other fragments will require a comma whether you connect them at beginning or the end. To make an intelligent comma decision, you first have to identify the *type* of fragment that you have.

A fragment will often be a lone *subordinate clause*, *participle phrase*, *infinitive phrase*, afterthought, lonely *verb phrase*, or *appositive*. Each type of fragment has a *marker* that identifies it.

SUBORDINATE CLAUSE FRAGMENTS

A subordinate clause fragment [sometimes called a *dependent* clause fragment] will begin with a *subordinate conjunction*, a *relative pronoun*, or a *relative adverb*. You will also find a *subject* and a *verb*. Unfortunately, this combination of words will not express a complete thought *by itself*.

Think of the problem like this: At work, there are bosses and their employees, also known as *subordinates*. When the bosses aren't directly supervising, many subordinates neglect their responsibilities. In a sentence, the main clause is the boss. If the boss is absent, the subordinate clause goofs off, and the job of communicating a full thought doesn't get done.

Here are the words that will begin a subordinate clause fragment:

SUBORDINATE CONJUNCTIONS		
after	in case	than
although	in that	that
as	in order that	though
as if	in so far as	till
as long as	just as	unless
as soon as	no matter how	until
as though	now that	when
because	once	whenever
before	provided that	where
even if	rather than	whereas

even though	since	wherever
how	so [*that* implied]	whether
if	so that	while

<table>
<tr><th colspan="3">RELATIVE PRONOUNS</th></tr>
<tr><td>that
what
whatever
which</td><td>whichever
who
whoever</td><td>whom
whomever
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<table>
<tr><th colspan="3">RELATIVE ADVERBS</th></tr>
<tr><td>when</td><td>where</td><td>why</td></tr>
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These words are your **markers** for this type of fragment.

Here are some examples:

> *Because* Chase caught the eye of the beautiful brunette in algebra.

Because = subordinate conjunction; *Chase* = subject; *caught* = verb.

What happened? Was he able to cheat on the test? Did he quickly ask her for a date? We don't know because the thought is *incomplete*.

> *Until* Rachel notices the toilet paper stuck to her shoe.

Until = subordinate conjunction; *Rachel* = subject; *notices* = verb.

What will happen? Will she embarrass her date? Will people at the restaurant stare? We don't know because this is another *incomplete* thought.

> *Even though* Fred stuck straws up his nose.

Even though = subordinate conjunction; *Fred* = subject; *stuck* = verb.

What happened? Could he still not pass for a walrus? Did the McDonald's manager offer him a job anyway? We don't know because this thought is *incomplete* too!

> *Whom* you can trust with the secret.

3

Whom = relative pronoun; *you* = subject; *can trust* = verb.

Who is this person? We don't know because this thought is not finished.

Where the popcorn is stale and the soda flat.

Where = relative adverb; *popcorn* = subject; *is* = verb.

This sounds like a place to avoid, but where is it? We don't have enough information to know because we have only half the thought.

PARTICIPLE PHRASE FRAGMENTS

A *participle phrase* fragment will begin with a word ending in *ing* or *ed*, or the fragment will open with an irregular past participle. More words will follow to finish the phrase, but nowhere will you find a *main clause* to complete the thought. *By itself*, a participle phrase cannot be a sentence.

Your marker for this type of fragment is the present or past participle that you will find at the beginning of the fragment.

Take a look at these examples:

> *Sunning* themselves on the hot concrete until they heard human feet crashing down the sidewalk.

> All the while *twirling* the baton with the speed and ferocity of helicopter blades.

> *Sucked* down the pipe with a hearty slurp.

> *Hidden* in the bureau drawer underneath a pile of mismatched socks.

INFINITIVE PHRASE FRAGMENTS

An *infinitive phrase* fragment will begin with *to* followed by the base form of the verb, like this:

> `TO` + `VERB` = infinitive.

Although more words will follow to finish the phrase, you will not find a *main clause* to complete the thought. An infinitive phrase—*by itself*—cannot be a sentence.

Look for the **to + verb** as your marker for this type of fragment.

Study these examples:

> Only *to watch* in dismay as Dr. Frazier poured her chemistry experiment into the sink.
>
> *To catch* butterflies for her biology project.
>
> *To break* a piece of plywood with his bare hands.

AFTERTHOUGHT FRAGMENTS

An afterthought clarifies earlier information by providing specific details. When an afterthought does not contain a *main clause*, it is a fragment. These words and phrases frequently begin afterthoughts: ***especially***, ***except***, ***excluding***, ***for example***, ***for instance***, ***including***, ***like***, and ***such as***.

These words are your markers for this type of fragment [although infrequently you will have *just* the list of details].

Here are some examples:

> *For example*, leaky pens, candy wrappers, dollar bills, and paperclips.
>
> *Including* the dog with three legs and the cat with one eye.
>
> *Such as* leaving the stove on and teasing mean dogs.

LONELY VERB FRAGMENTS

Writers will sometimes forget to include a *subject* in a sentence. The result is a *verb* pining for its partner. With the subject missing, the word group thus becomes a lonely verb fragment.

A lonely verb fragment will often begin with a *coordinating conjunction* [***and***, ***but***, ***for***, ***or***, ***nor***, ***so***, ***yet***]. The marker for this type of fragment will be the immediate expression of action. Remember that a verb *alone* cannot be a sentence.

Study these examples:

> And *dashed* through the downpour as raindrops softened the hairspray shell holding her elaborate coif in place.

But *knew* that all of his effort would prove useless in the long run.

Took the thick book and, with a heavy sigh, loaded it on top of her research pile.

APPOSITIVE FRAGMENTS

An *appositive* is a *noun phrase* that renames and clarifies anther *noun*. Because an appositive can be long, writers sometimes mistake one for a complete sentence. *By itself*, however, an appositive is not a sentence.

An appositive fragment will begin with a noun and usually include one or more clarifying *phrases* or *subordinate clauses* after it.

Here are some examples:

The unprepared *student* who was always begging for an extra pencil and a couple sheets of blank paper.

A *slacker* wasting his afternoon in front of the television.

A *dog* around whom people need to guard their fingers and food.

Know how to fix the fragment that you have found.

You can fix any fragment by either 1) revising the fragment so that it includes a *main clause* or 2) connecting the fragment to a main clause that comes before or after it. When you connect, you have to know whether or not punctuation is required. Learning the nine punctuation rules that follow will help you not only fix fragments but also punctuate your sentences correctly.

FIXING SUBORDINATE CLAUSE FRAGMENTS

When you have a *subordinate clause* fragment, removing *one thing*—the *subordinating word*—will give you the necessary *main clause*. Look at this fragment:

Because Chase caught the eye of the beautiful brunette in algebra.

Removing **because** makes the thought complete. **Chase** is the subject, **caught** the verb. Now you have a sentence!

> Chase caught the eye of the beautiful brunette in algebra.

If, however, you need the subordinating word because of the meaning it provides, then fix the fragment by connecting it.

If you attach the fragment *after* a main clause, use **Punctuation Rule 1**:

> MAIN CLAUSE + Ø + SUBORDINATE CLAUSE .

Here is an example:

> We will continue giggling Ø *until Rachel notices the toilet paper stuck to her shoe*.

If you attach the fragment *in front of* a main clause, use **Punctuation Rule 2**:

> SUBORDINATE CLAUSE + , + MAIN CLAUSE .

The fix looks like this:

> *Even though Fred stuck straws up his nose*, Melissa ate her tuna fish sandwich and continued to ignore him.

FIXING PARTICIPLE PHRASE FRAGMENTS

One way to fix a *participle phrase* fragment is to add the necessary *main clause*. Here is such a fragment:

> Sunning themselves on the hot concrete until they heard human feet crashing down the sidewalk.

Notice that you're not sure what species is enjoying the warmth. If you add this information and *complete* the *verb*, the problem would be fixed. The correction would look like this:

> The little lizards were *sunning themselves on the hot concrete until they heard human feet crashing down the sidewalk*.

In addition, you can attach a participle phrase fragment *after* a main clause. Just follow **Punctuation Rule 3**:

> MAIN CLAUSE + , + PARTICIPLE PHRASE .

Check out this sample:

> The majorette marched at the front of the parade, *all the while twirling her batons with the speed and ferocity of helicopter blades*.

Or you can choose to use **Punctuation Rule 4**:

P A R T I C I P L E   P H R A S E + **,** + M A I N   C L A U S E .

The participle phrase *introduces* the main clause, like this:

> *Sucked down the pipe with a hearty slurp,* the dirty bath water drained from the tub.

FIXING INFINITIVE PHRASE FRAGMENTS

You can convert an *infinitive phrase* fragment into a sentence by adding a *subject* and conjugating the *verb*.

Take a look at this fragment:

> Only to watch in dismay as Dr. Frazier poured her chemistry experiment into the sink.

When you read this fragment, you don't know *who* is involved. With a couple of minor changes, however, you have the necessary *main clause* that every sentence requires:

> *Amber watched* in dismay as Dr. Frazier poured her chemistry experiment into the sink.

If you don't like that option, you can attach an infinitive phrase fragment *after* a main clause. Just follow **Punctuation Rule 5**:

M A I N   C L A U S E + Ø + I N F I N I T I V E   P H R A S E .

Here's how it will look:

> Jossie enlisted the help of several spiders Ø *to catch butterflies for her biology project*.

Or you can use **Punctuation Rule 6**:

I N F I N I T I V E   P H R A S E + **,** + M A I N   C L A U S E .

The infinitive phrase *introduces* the main clause, like this:

> *To break a piece of plywood with his bare hands*, Daniel followed his karate teacher's advice and focused his power.

FIXING AFTERTHOUGHT FRAGMENTS

You can fix an afterthought fragment one of two ways. One option is to insert the missing *subject* and *verb* so that you have a *main clause*. This option works best when you have **for example** and **for instance** as the transitions beginning the fragment.

Take a look at this example:

> For example, leaky pens, candy wrappers, dollar bills, and paperclips.

The simple addition of a subject and verb will fix the problem:

> For example, *the desk drawer contained* leaky pens, candy wrappers, dollar bills, and paperclips.

Or you can attach the afterthought fragment to the end of a main clause. This option works best when the fragment begins with *except*, *excluding*, *including*, *like* and *such as*. Use **Punctuation Rule 7**:

> **MAIN CLAUSE** + **,** + **AFTERTHOUGHT TRANSITION** + Ø + **DETAILS** .

The correction looks like this:

> John has many unsafe habits, *such as Ø leaving the stove on and teasing mean dogs*.

FIXING LONELY VERB FRAGMENTS

One missing element—the *subject*—makes a lonely verb fragment an error. Here is such a fragment:

> And dashed through the downpour as raindrops softened the hairspray shell holding her elaborate coif in place.

Who did the dashing? We don't know. The subject might be mentioned in a sentence that came previously, but *this* word group is a fragment because no subject exists in *it*.

To correct the error, all you need to do is insert a subject, like this:

> ***Betty*** dashed through the downpour as raindrops softened the hairspray shell holding her elaborate coif in place.

If you want to connect this type of fragment to a main clause in front, use **Punctuation Rule 8**:

> **MAIN CLAUSE** + Ø + **LONELY VERB PHRASE** .*
>
> With a heavy sigh, Darryl began counting the words of his essay Ø ***but knew that all of his effort would prove useless in the long run***.

*If the coordinating conjunction beginning the lonely verb phrase connects *three or more* verbs, you will need to use a comma. See *Comma Tip 4*.

FIXING APPOSITIVE FRAGMENTS

You have two options when fixing an *appositive* fragment. Since an appositive contains a *noun* which can conveniently become a *subject*, adding a *verb* will often fix the problem.

Look at this example:

> The unprepared student who was always begging for an extra pencil and a couple sheets of blank paper.

We know *who* we are talking about; now we need to know what this student *did*.

> The unprepared student who was always begging for an extra pencil and a couple sheets of blank paper ***screamed***.

If you don't like ***screamed***, try ***cried***, ***sang***, ***protested*** the accusations, ***bit*** his lip, ***crossed*** his fingers, **flirted** with Jasmine, etc.

Another good option is to connect the appositive to a *main clause*.

Punctuation Rule 9 says this: No matter where you attach the appositive—at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end—always use comma(s) to separate it.

Here are some samples:

> *A slacker wasting his afternoon in front of the television***,** Brian opened a bag of potato chips instead of his chemistry textbook.

> Brian**,** *a slacker wasting his afternoon in front of the television***,** opened a bag of potato chips instead of his chemistry textbook.

> On the lawn chair lay Rocket**,** *a dog around whom people need to guard their fingers and food*.