University of
**CUMBRIA**

# A Quick Guide

# To

# Writing Sentences

Using a combination of simple, compound and complex sentences helps us to write more fluently.

This guide will cover the basics of each of the three sentence-types, focussing on the underlying grammar and syntax.

Before studying this guide, please consult A Quick Guide to Basic Sentence Structure, which contains important information about finite and non-finite verbs.

Please note: This guide contains various exemplars. Where a particular exemplar is designed to highlight a grammatical error, it has a cross next to it (X). Where a particular exemplar is presented in its correct form to contrast it with an incorrect version, it is followed by a tick (✓)

# Contents

# 1: Three Different Sentence Types

In English grammar, there are three main sentence types:

- ➢ Simple sentences
- ➢ Compound sentences
- ➢ Complex sentences

Before we study the grammatical structure of each type of sentence, let's look at a few examples:

    i.    Examples of Simple Sentences:

- ➢ The results were published.

- ➢ Signs of recovery are evident.

- ➢ The conclusion provides a summary.


    ii.    Examples of Compound Sentences:

- ➢ The results were published, and the results were shared.

- ➢ Signs of recovery are evident, but more funding is needed.

- ➢ The conclusion provides a summary, yet it fails to mention two key points.


    iii.    Example of Complex Sentences:

- ➢ Although the results were published, they were not shared.

- ➢ Recovery is likely to continue as long as funding increases.

- ➢ While the conclusion provides a summary, it fails to mention two key points.

# 2: The Simple Sentence

### i.     Single Subject

A simple sentence provides a subject (who or what we are writing about), and makes at least one statement about it. Subjects are usually nouns (objects, concepts or people). In the three examples below, the noun subjects are underlined:

> ➢ <u>The analysis</u> proceeds.

> ➢ <u>The amount of oxygen</u> increases.

> ➢ <u>The lecturer</u> speaks.

### ii.    Single Finite Verb

A simple sentence must contain at least one finite verb.  A verb is a word that describes an action or a state. A finite verb (in brackets below) is a verb that appears in various modified forms according to who or what is doing the action, and what tense is being used:

> ➢ The lecturer (proceeds).
> ➢ The lecturers (proceed).
> ➢ The lecturers (proceeded).

Sometimes, the subject is placed at the end of the sentence. In the examples below, the subjects are underlined and the finite verbs are in brackets:

> ➢ This (is) <u>a relevant example</u>. ('is' derives from the verb 'to be')
> ➢ There (was) <u>considerable debate</u>. ('was' derives from the verb 'to be').

### PAUSE

A sentence that only contains a non-finite verb is not grammatically complete, so it is important to understand the difference between these two verb types. For an explanation of non-finite verbs, please consult Section 3 of:-
A Quick Guide to Basic Sentence Structure.

# 3: Understanding Single Clauses

A simple sentence contains one clause. A clause is a group of words containing a subject (underlined below) and a single statement made about that subject (in brackets below). The statement must contain or comprise a finite verb:

➢ <u>The analysis</u> (concludes).
➢ <u>The data</u> (is flawed).

In the examples above, our subjects each consist of a single noun. However, in simple sentences it is possible to have a two-part or 'twin' subject consisting of more than one noun, with the same statement or verb phrase attached to it. The twin-subject is underlined:

➢ <u>The analysis and the evaluation</u> conclude.
➢ <u>The data and the analysis</u> are flawed.

A clause in a simple sentence may make two statements (in brackets below) about a single subject:

➢ The analysis (concludes) and (is successful).
➢ The data (is flawed) and (requires further scrutiny).

It may also make two statements (in brackets below) about a twin-subject:

➢ The analysis and evaluation (conclude) and (are successful).
➢ The data and method (are flawed) and (require further scrutiny).

The above examples are all single-clause simple sentences.

# 4: The Difference Between Clauses and Phrases

In the previous section we saw that a simple sentence contains a single clause consisting of a subject (underlined below) and a verb or verb phrase (shown in brackets):

➢ <u>The analysis</u> (concludes).
➢ <u>The analysis</u> (is flawed).

However, a simple sentence may also contain a 'phrase' that provides extra information and details. Unlike clauses, phrases cannot stand alone:

➢ The analysis concludes <u>with a controversial statement</u>.
➢ <u>In several key respects</u>, the data is flawed.

The above examples (with additional phrases underlined) are still simple sentences as they each only contain a single clause (The analysis concludes / the data is flawed).

## RECAP AND CONSOLIDATE

Although a simple sentence contains a single clause, an additional phrase may be added to this clause.  As long as this additional phrase does not itself contain a subject and a verb (i.e. as long as it is not itself a clause), the finished sentence will remain a simple sentence.

For guidance on using commas with added phrases, please see Section 11.

# 5: The Compound Sentence

If we have two separate clauses, each containing its own subject and its own verb, we also have two separate, simple sentences:

> ➢ The analysis is flawed. Further data is required.

However, if we join these two simple sentences together with a conjunction (a linking word), we produce a compound sentence containing both clauses:

> ➢ The analysis is flawed, and further data is required.

Here are two further examples of compound sentences, each containing two clauses:

> ➢ The essay is complete, but it needs editing.
> ➢ Silence can be productive, for it allows time for reflection.

Set out as simple sentences, the above examples read as follows:

> ➢ The draft is complete. It needs editing.
> ➢ Silence can be productive. It allows time for reflection.

PAUSE

Notice how both compound sentences allow us to be clearer about our overall meaning.

In the first, the word 'but' emphasises that the essay is only 'complete' in draft form.

In the second, the word 'for' helps us to understand that having time for reflection is a direct result of having silence.

Many grammar guides offer the acronym 'fanboys' to help us remember the conjunctions that can be used to link simple sentences together to make compound sentences.

- for
- and
- nor
- but
- or
- yet
- so

Below is a series of sentences, each of which demonstrates how to use these seven conjunctions:

1. Walking is beneficial, for it increases blood flow to the heart.
2. The introduction is concise, and the conclusion is effective.
3. The results do not prove conclusive, nor do they offer insight.
4. The premise was valid, but the deductions were questionable.
5. This approach may help, or it may hinder.
6. Commuters favour trains, yet often find they are running late.
7. I needed to know which bus to catch, so I studied the timetable.

PAUSE

Of the seven compound sentences above, six of them could be split into pairs of single sentences by removing the conjunctions and not changing any of the other words. The exception is Sentence 3, which uses the tricky conjunction 'nor' and would need to be rewritten as follows:

- The results do not prove conclusive. They do not offer insight.

# 6: Using Commas in Compound Sentences

In Section 5, you may have noticed that a comma has been used in each of the compound sentences. As explained in Section 3 of [A Quick Guide to Commas](#), this is called a 'joining comma', and indicates to the reader where the logical place for a pause comes. Try reading the seven sentences on page 8 aloud, and be sure to pause slightly before the conjunction. Your pause should fall in the same place as the comma.

# 7: Leaving Out Commas in Compound Sentences

In compound sentences where each of the joined clauses is short, it is not always necessary to use a comma before the conjunction:

> ➢ The methodology was valid, and the procedure worked. ✓
> ➢ The methodology was valid and the procedure worked.   ✓

PAUSE

Another acceptable approach for the example above would be use a semicolon:

> ➢ The methodology was valid; the procedure worked. ✓

However, it is important to have a full understanding of what semicolons are before using them. For guidance, please refer to [A Quick Guide to Semicolons](#).

# 8: Independent Clauses

It is important to understand that in compound sentences, each clause is considered equal and independent. This is because there are two potentially self-sufficient sentences that are now joined together, but which could be separated again:

➢ The premise was valid, but the deductions were questionable. ✓
➢ The premise was valid. The deductions were questionable.   ✓

An 'independent clause' will always contain its own subject and a finite verb associated with that subject.

Think of compound sentences as having two equally important 'halves', each capable of standing alone.

# 9: The Complex Sentence

A complex sentence is different from a compound sentence in that it does not contain two independent or equally weighted clauses. Instead, it contains a main, independent clause and a secondary, 'dependent' clause. This is sometimes also called a 'subordinate clause' (subordinate means, 'less important than').

➢ (Although the results were published), <u>they were not shared</u>. ✓

In the above example, the subordinate clause is (in brackets) and the main clause is <u>underlined</u>.

Like the main clause, the subordinate clause contains a subject ('the results') and a phrase built around a finite verb (were published). However, it also has the word 'Although' attached to the beginning of it:

➢ Although the results were published....

The word 'Although' is a kind of conjunction, but it is different from the conjunctions we looked at in Section 5.

Think of 'Although' as a 'sticky' conjunction: it 'sticks' (attaches itself) to the front of the first clause in our sentence, and makes it 'dependent' on the subsequent main clause. For this reason, we cannot write this dependent or subordinate clause on its own and then use a full stop:

➢ Although the results were published. X (incorrect)

The above example is not a true sentence, as the reader now expects to be told what happened 'although the result were published'.

REMEMBER:

A subordinate or dependent clause does not communicate a fully rounded meaning to the reader, and must be followed by a main clause.

# 10: More Examples of Complex Sentences

Below are some more examples of complex sentences beginning with a 'sticky' conjunction that attaches itself to the first clause and makes that clause 'subordinate' or 'dependent':

> ➢ <u>As</u> recovery is weak, the economy will not recover quickly.
> ➢ <u>After</u> the rain stops, we will go out.
> ➢ <u>Before</u> switching off your computer, you should sign out.
> ➢ <u>Unless</u> conditions improve, the expedition will not go ahead.
> ➢ <u>Until</u> the data is available, we can only make estimates.
> ➢ <u>When</u> taking measurements, be sure to use the correct equipment.
> ➢ <u>While</u> we wait for a resolution, we will report on events.

PAUSE:

Notice that in the third and sixth examples above, the subordinate clause only contains a non-finite verb ('switching', 'taking'). This is another way in which subordinate clauses are different from main clauses, which must contain at least one 'finite' verb.

For an explanation of non-finite verbs, please consult Section 3 of:-

A Quick Guide to Basic Sentence Structure

# 11: Commas and Subordinate Clauses (1)

Let's look at our complex sentences again. Notice that in each case, a comma has been used to separate the subordinate clause from the main clause:

- ➢ As recovery is weak, the economy will not recover quickly.
- ➢ After the rain stops, we will go out.
- ➢ Before switching off your computer, you should sign out.
- ➢ Unless conditions improve, the expedition will not go ahead.
- ➢ Until the data is available, we can only make estimates.
- ➢ When taking measurements, be sure to use the correct equipment.
- ➢ While we wait for a resolution, we will report on events.

In each case, the comma indicates to the reader where the natural place is to pause.

# 12: Commas and Subordinate Clauses (2)

You may have noticed that the sentences in the previous section all begin with the subordinate clause:

> ➢ When taking measurements, be sure to use the correct equipment.

However, there are many cases where it is possible to 'flip' a complex sentence around, so the subordinate clause comes at the end:

> ➢ Be sure to use the correct equipment when taking measurements.

Notice that in its 'flipped' form, this sentence no longer requires a comma between the main and the subordinate clause. This is because when reading the sentence this way round, it does not sound natural to pause after the word 'equipment' (try it and see).

Here are 'flipped' versions of our other complex sentences:

> ➢ We will go out after the rain stops.
> ➢ You should sign out before switching off your computer.
> ➢ The expedition will not go ahead unless conditions improve.
> ➢ We can only make estimates until the data is available.
> ➢ Be sure to use the correct equipment when taking measurements.
> ➢ We will report on events while we wait for a resolution.

PAUSE:

There is no reliable rule for deciding if a particular complex sentence can be 'flipped' in this way. As always when writing, we should read our finished sentence aloud to check that it makes sense, and communicates its meaning in the way we want it to.

# 13: Summary of Conjunctions

If you are unsure which linking words to use for compound and/or complex sentences, this is a summary you can refer to:

    i.     For creating compound sentences where both clauses are equal and independent, use the following:

- for
- and
- nor
- but
- or
- yet
- so

These can be used after a comma, although this is not strictly necessary if each half of the compound sentence is short:

I am here at the University of Chicago, and you are there at the University of Cumbria.  ✓

I am here and you are there.  ✓

    ii.     Use these 'sticky' conjunctions to make complex sentences, by attaching them to the front of one of your clauses:

- As
- After
- Before
- Unless
- Until
- When
- While
- Although

Remember that the subordinate clause with the sticky conjunction at the start of it can be placed at the beginning of a sentence, with a comma separating it from the main clause:

➢ Before switching off your computer, you should sign out. ✓

It can also be placed at the back end of the sentence, without a comma:

➢ You should sign out before switching off your computer. ✓

## PAUSE

The above list of 'sticky' conjunctions is not complete, and contains just some of the more widely used words that can be used to construct complex sentences. For further, more in-depth guidance, please consult the relevant section of the [Grammarly.com](Grammarly.com) website.

## A Word of Reassurance

The 'rules' of grammar and punctuation are there to help and support our writing, but rules do not always have be followed 'to the letter'.

It is more important that our sentences 'read well' and communicate clearly. For this reason, it is essential to proof-read our work, reading aloud to check for sense, clarity and correct meaning.

In particular, we should avoid writing very long and overly complicated sentences, as these will sometimes 'muddy' the meaning rather than making it clearer.

# 14: Further Steps to Improve Your Sentences

In addition to studying this guide, we recommend the following:

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| Enrol on the English Support Pages on Blackboard | The English Support site on Blackboard contains resources to help you with all aspects of language development, including writing effective sentences. |
| | You will find a link to Blackboard on the university's [Spelling and Grammar page.](#) |
| Consult books and other resources | [The Students' Guide to Writing](#) is a useful resource if you want to improve your confidence with writing sentences. |
| Do some analytical reading specifically to develop your awareness of sentence construction. | One of the best ways to improve your sentence construction is to study passages of English academic writing, and observe how writers handle different sentence types. |
| Proof-read | Check and proof-read your work, and try to make sure you are using a range of different sentence-types, and that they are grammatically accurate. |