Sentences

A complete sentence contains a SUBJECT and a VERB and can stand alone. The subject names something and consists of one or more nouns or pronouns. The verb expresses action or a state of being. A sentence fragment lacks a subject or a verb. Sentence fragments are sometimes used in formal writing (e.g. what now? what a chore!), but they are unacceptable in business and academic writing.

Sentence purposes

Sentences serve the following purposes:

They make a statement. (I live in the city.)
They ask a question. (What do you want for dinner?)
They give a command. (Put the letter on my desk.) In this sentence, the subject, you, is not stated.
They make a request. (Please answer the telephone.)
They express a strong feeling. (I cannot believe you said that!)

Sentence parts

Sentences contain word groups. Some of these word groups can stand alone, and others cannot.

Phrase: A phrase is a group of words that lacks a subject, a verb, or both. Phrases cannot stand alone; they add information to the sentence (in a rush, running past the window, to the office).

Independent clause: An independent clause is a group of words that contains a subject and a verb and can stand alone as a complete sentence. (The architects designed the building.)

Dependent Clause: A dependent clause is a group of words that contains a subject and a verb but depends on another clause to complete the thought. A dependent clause begins with a subordinator (a connector like if, when, because, although, since, which, or that) that prevents the clause from standing alone as a complete sentence (when I arrived, because they are late).

Sentence types

English has four basic sentence types:

Simple Sentence—one independent clause
Compound Sentence—two or more independent clauses
Complex Sentence—at least one independent clause and one or more dependent clauses
Compound–Complex Sentence—two or more independent clauses and at least one dependent clause

Rules for forming sentences

Rule #1:

Form a simple sentence if you are expressing only one complete thought.
Example of Rule #1:

Eric organized the filing system.

Rule #2:

Form a compound sentence if you are expressing two or more complete thoughts. In English, there are three ways of combining independent clauses to form compound sentences.

Examples of Rule #2:

Method One: Connect independent clauses with a comma and a coordinating conjunction (one of the connecting words in the acronym F.A.N.B.O.Y.S. [for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so]). You must use both the comma and the coordinating conjunction. Joining two independent clauses with only a comma is an error called a comma splice. Joining two independent clauses with nothing between them is an error called a run–on or fused sentence.

Eric organized the filing system, but he did not update the files.

Method Two: Connect independent clauses with a semicolon.

Eric organized the filing system; he did not update the files.

Method Three: Connect independent clauses with a semicolon, a transitional word (a conjunction such as however, therefore, or thus that is not one of the F.A.N.B.O.Y.S. words), and a comma.

Eric organized the filing system; however, he did not update the files.

Rule #3:

Form a complex sentence by connecting an independent clause with a subordinator and at least one dependent clause. Subordinators are connectors such as because, while, when, after, although, until, and whenever. The dependent clause(s) and the independent clause can be in any order. When a dependent clause begins the sentence, follow it with a comma.

Examples of Rule #3:

Although he did not update the files, Eric organized the filing system.
Eric organized the filing system although he did not update the files.

Rule #4:

Form a compound–complex sentence by connecting more than one independent clause and a dependent clause, in any order.

Example of Rule #4:

When Eric was hired, he organized the filing system, but he did not update the files.