



University of Vermont Graduate Writing Center

Sentence Structure and Clauses

Independent Clauses

An independent clause expresses an idea which is whole on its own; a single independent clause can form a “complete sentence.” These are sometimes also called main clauses.

Dependent Clauses

A dependent clause expresses an idea which is not whole on its own; it needs an independent clause to “hang off of,” which completes the idea expressed in the dependent clause. These are sometimes also called subordinate clauses.

Dependent clauses are joined to independent clauses by *conjunctions* such as “because,” “so that,” “when,” “if,” and other similar words. Clauses (other than questions) starting with words like “who,” “what,” “which,” are dependent clauses of a specific type, called *relative* clauses.

Sentence Types

There are four types of sentences in English.

- A simple sentence consists of one independent clause.
 - *She walked to the store.*
- A compound sentence consists of at least two independent clauses “strung together” with a connecting word.
 - *She walked to the store, and she bought bread.*
- A complex sentence consists of one independent clause and at least one dependent clause (though it may have more).
 - Complex sentence with a single dependent clause: *When the rain had stopped, she walked to the store.*
 - Complex sentence with multiple dependent clauses: *When the rain had stopped, she walked to the store, which was open late.*

- A compound-complex sentence consists of multiple independent clauses and at least one dependent clause (though it may have more).
 - Compound-complex sentence: *When the rain had stopped, she walked to the store, and she bought bread.*

Common Sentence Errors and How to Fix Them

- Sentence fragments
 - A “fragment” is a sentence which is not complete. Sentence fragments are most common when a dependent clause is punctuated with a period. The easiest way to fix it is by combining the fragment with the main clause it properly belongs to; this is often as simple as adding a comma instead of a period between sentences.
 - Fragment: *She drove to the store. Which was far away.*
 - Corrected: *She drove to the store, which was far away.*
- Run-on sentences
 - A run-on sentence does **not** mean “a really long sentence.”
 - A run-on sentence is made up of two independent clauses which are not connected with punctuation or conjunctions. There are usually multiple different ways to fix run-on sentences; typically, adding either a semicolon, period, or a comma and a conjunction between clauses will make it grammatically correct.
 - Run-on: *It was raining she walked to the store anyway.*
 - Corrected: *It was raining; she walked to the store anyway.*
 - Corrected: *It was raining. She walked to the store anyway.*
 - Corrected: *It was raining, but she walked to the store anyway.*
- Comma splices
 - Comma splices are related to run-on sentences. This happens when you have two independent clauses joined only by a comma. You can fix them by either changing the comma to a semicolon, period, or adding a conjunction.
 - Comma splice: *I wrote a paper, it took me a long time.*
 - Corrected: *I wrote a paper; it took me a long time.*
 - Corrected: *I wrote a paper. It took me a long time.*
 - Corrected: *I wrote a paper, and it took me a long time.*