

THE SENTENCE FRAGMENT

“With sixty staring me in the face, I have developed inflammation of the sentence structure and a definite hardening of the paragraphs.” James Thurber (at age 59)

The grammar outlaw: The Sentence Fragment

The grammar crime: Fragments are incomplete sentences. Professors do not accept sentence fragments in English papers.

Question: How do we know we have a fragment?

Outlaw
Considering the theme of imprisonment in Atwood’s <i>Life Before Man</i> .

Who/what is considering the theme of imprisonment?

- The sentence does not tell us; therefore, it has no subject.
- “Considering” as an -ing verb is not complete without a helping verb.
This sentence has neither a subject nor a complete verb. This is a fragment.

Question: How do we catch sentence fragment outlaws?

A. Examine all sentences. Do they contain all the necessary sentence elements? To review the parts of the sentence, check the Glossary.

- Is there a verb? If not, supply one.
- Is there a subject? If not, supply one.
- Is there a subordinating conjunction? If so , remove it.

B. Try the “Yes/No Question” Test. Can you rephrase the sentence into a yes/no question?

- If you can, then it is a complete sentence.
- If you cannot, then it is a fragment.

word group	yes/no question	fragment?
I enjoyed reading <i>Wuthering Heights</i> .	Did I enjoy reading <i>Wuthering Heights</i> ?	This question makes sense, so the word group is a complete sentence .
Reading <i>Wuthering Heights</i> .	Was reading <i>Wuthering Heights</i> ?	This question does not make sense, so the word group is a fragment .

Clues: The following are five of the types of fragments that occur in writing. Knowing these possible errors will help you spot sentence fragments.

1. A group of words without a subject and/or a verb

- Sentences need both subjects and verbs.

word group	yes/no question	fragment?
Author of <i>Midnight's Children</i> , the Booker award-winning novel.	Was the author of <i>Midnight's Children</i> , the Booker award-winning novel?	fragment
Salman Rushdie is the author of <i>Midnight's Children</i> , the Booker award-winning novel.	Is Salman Rushdie the author of <i>Midnight's Children</i> , the Booker award-winning novel?	complete sentence

2. An -ing verb without a form of the verb "to be"

- These are known as participial phrases.
- Without a form of the verb "to be" these word groups become fragments.

word group	yes/no question	fragment?
Reading Camus's <i>The Plague</i> .	Was reading Camus's <i>The Plague</i> ?	fragment
Sarah is reading Camus's <i>The Plague</i> .	Was Sarah reading Camus's <i>The Plague</i> ?	complete sentence

3. Dependent clauses without an independent clause

There are two types of dependent clauses:

<p>beginning with a <u>transitional word</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e.g., although, because, if, when, while
<p>beginning with relative pronouns</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e.g., who, whom, which, that

You must attach dependent clauses to independent clauses.

word group	yes/no question	fragment?
While Estragon and Vladimir were waiting for Godot.	Was while Estragon and Vladimir were waiting for Godot?	fragment

While they were waiting for Godot, Estragon and Vladimir met Pozzo and Lucky.	Did Estragon and Vladimir meet Pozzo and Lucky while they were waiting for Godot?	complete sentence
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4. Word groups beginning with co-ordinating conjunctions (and, for, so, or, yet, nor)

- These are fragments.
- Note: One can begin a sentence with “but.”

word group	yes/no question	fragment?
So Jane left the Reeds’ house.	Did so Jane leave the Reeds’ house?	fragment
Jane left the Reeds’ house.	Did Jane leave the Reeds’ house?	complete sentence

5. Long phrases beginning with prepositions (although, during, concerning, instead of)

- To be complete, prepositional phrases need to be connected to independent clauses. Alone, they are fragments.

word group	yes/no question	fragment?
During the first act of <i>Twelfth Night</i> .	Was during the first act of <i>Twelfth Night</i> ?	fragment
During the first act of <i>Twelfth Night</i> , Viola and Orsino meet.	Did Viola and Orsino meet during the first act of <i>Twelfth Night</i> ?	complete sentence

Note: Fragments will often occur in the context of other sentences.

Example: Findley’s *Famous Last Words* features Mauberley. A fictional character in a poem by Ezra Pound.

word group	yes/no question	fragment?
Findley’s <i>Famous Last Words</i> features Mauberley.	Does Findley’s <i>Famous Last Words</i> feature Mauberley?	complete sentence
A fictional character in a poem by Ezra Pound.	Who a fictional character in a poem by Ezra Pound?	fragment

Question: How do we rehabilitate sentence fragment outlaws?

You can fix fragments in two ways. First, you can add the missing elements to the sentence. Second, you can attach the fragment to a nearby sentence, but only if this makes sense.

Rehabilitated

I was considering the theme of imprisonment in Atwood's *Life Before Man*.

Findley's *Famous Last Words* features Mauberley, a fictional character in a poem by Ezra Pound.

The Exception to the Fragment Rule: Fragments are not outlaws in three cases.

1. Fragments can be used in **advertising** for emphasis.
2. Authors use fragments in **creative writing**. Fragments imitate natural speech patterns. They can also become a part of a writer's style. Therefore, Margaret Atwood does not commit a grammar crime when she uses sentence fragments in her novels.
3. Fragments are acceptable in **informal situations**, such as personal letters and notes. **A formal essay is not an informal situation.**