

# Sentence structure

This helpsheet will look at the basics of sentence structure, and how to handle sentences for the purposes academic writing. It should be noted at the outset that there are many purposes for writing, and many writing 'genres'. This helpsheet relates only to sentences used in formal academic writing.

English sentences are of three main types: **simple**, **compound** and **complex**.

## Simple sentence

- Contains one main clause\*: e.g., *The explosion destroyed every house on the block.*

\*A 'clause' is the smallest grammatical unit that results in a complete sentence. This consists of a subject (noun phrase) and a predicate (containing a main verb). In the example above, the subject is 'explosion' and the verb is 'destroyed'.

## Compound sentence

- Consists of two or more main clauses, usually connected by a coordinating conjunction (*and*, *but*, *for*, *as*, *so*), e.g.,
  - *Malaria is a problem in the region, but cholera is far more devastating.*
- In this example there are two clauses: 'Malaria is a problem in the region' and 'Cholera is far more devastating'. They are joined by 'but' making a single thought with two parts. Compound sentences are desirable in academic writing as they make writing less "choppy" and they help to make for economy of ideas.

## Complex sentence:

- This consists of one independent clause and at least one dependent clause. One relies on the other. The main idea is in the independent clause, creating an order of significance. This is by far the hardest type of sentence to write, however it gives English great subtlety.
  - *'The students went to a party even though they had an assignment due.'*
  - *'The actor, who had made many movies, died a lonely, broken man.'*
- In these cases, the main ideas are (respectively): 'The students went to a party' and 'The actor died a lonely, broken man'. They are the independent clauses because they stand-alone as sentences. The other clauses (dependent clauses) *qualify* the main clauses with further information.
- There are different ways of joining independent and dependent clauses. **Subordinating conjunctions** (*because*, *although*, *if*, *until*, *while*, *though*, *after*) or **relative pronouns** (*that*, *who*, *whose*, *which* and *whom*) are generally used connect the clauses but they do a different job.
- Subordinating conjunctions, as the name suggests, *subordinate* one clause to another more important clause (idea). Relative pronouns simply *relate* something to the main clause (without subordination).



- It is important to get the order of independent and dependent clauses right, and the right choice of subordinating conjunctions or relative pronouns, otherwise the meaning changes. For example, compare the following:

- 'The actor, who had made many movies, died a lonely, broken man.'* (relative clause)
- 'Although he had made many movies, the actor died a lonely, broken man'* (subordinating clause)
- 'After he had made many movies, the actor died a lonely, broken man.'* (subordinating clause)

The first suggests it is incidental that he made movies. The second intimates that it is puzzling he died lonely and broken because he should have made money and fame from his movies. The third makes it clear that his death occurred following a period of movie-making!

### Poor control of subordinating conjunctions = unclear writing

Generally, most native-speakers can write simple and compound sentences well. However, many have trouble with complex sentences. This usually results from poor control of subordinating conjunctions. A few tips:

- **Try not to use subordinating conjunctions at the start of a sentence**, unless you intend to keep the sentence *very* short like (b) above. The longer the sentence, the harder it is to control the meaning. Starting a sentence with “Although”, “While”, “Though”, “Because” *forces* the writer to place the subject and main verb far from the beginning of the sentence. This is seldom done well. Take this example (actual student work):
  - *'Because the economy of each country is becoming closer due to globalisation every country depends on the economy in other countries'.* (Try: Globalisation means that every country depends on the economy of other countries.)
- **Try not to use too many subordinating clauses:** *'Although he had made many movies, and while he was famous through the movie-business, the actor died a lonely, broken man'*. Too many subordinating clauses makes the sentence less clear. Stick to one subordinating clause per sentence, until you master clear writing.
- **Keep the subject of the sentence and the main verb close to the beginning of the sentence.** The reader needs to know *what each sentence is about* (subject), and *what is being done* (verb). This needs to be close to the start of each sentence. See the example above. The subject is 'The actor', the verb is 'died': *Although he had made many movies, the actor died a lonely, broken man'*. Even better: 'The actor died a lonely, broken man, even though he made many movies'.
- **Vary your subordinating clauses.** Don't overuse one kind of subordinating clause. Mix them up.

### Exercises:

#### 1. Circle the main subject and underline the main verb in the following examples of simple sentences:

- The canteen will be open at 9am.
- Don't go changing to try and please me, I want you just the way you are.
- The ladies of the harem of the court of King Catactacus were just passing by.

#### 2. Join the following simple sentences with one or more of the coordinating conjunctions: *and, or but, for, as, so*:

- It is simple. Simple things can be hard.
- The situation is hopeless. We must take the next step.
- The students had a great surprise. The exam was postponed until the following week. Any student that had not submitted their essay would not be permitted to sit the exam.



**3. Use subordinating clauses (i.e., the words *because, although, if, until, while, though, after*) to revise these sentences so that those concepts that deserve the most emphasis appear at the end.**

1. There are limited opportunities for teachers to work with individual students in large American colleges and universities.

---

---

2. Several reconstruction evaluation studies are presented in addition to the aforementioned summary discussions for your general information.

---

---

Adapted from Williams, *Ten Lessons in Style and Grace*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition **Exercise 4-1**

**4. Rewrite the following sentences using a mixture of simple, compound and complex sentences to improve clarity.**

1. The future of those engaged in studies at the postgraduate level, seeking advanced degrees from institutions of higher education, in regard to prospects for desirable employment in teaching positions at best does not have a high degree of certainty.

---

---

2. The major matter that I want to ask about at this point is the degree to which the government policy on asylum seekers can be seen to have the capacity for impacting adversely on the social development of refugee children in a situation in which their basic needs are not being met.

---

---

---

3. Notwithstanding the fact that all legal restrictions on the use of firearms are the subject of heated debate and argument, it is necessary that the general public not stop carrying on discussion pro and con in regard to them.

---

---

---

