Chapter 5

Having It All: The Complete Sentence

In This Chapter

- Identifying the elements of a complete sentence
- Uniting two or more complete sentences properly
- Joining ideas of unequal importance
- Dealing with sentence fragments
- Placing periods, questions marks, and exclamation points in the correct spot

Everyone knows the most important rule of English grammar: All sentences must be complete. But everyone breaks the rule. I just did! *But everyone breaks the rule* is not a complete sentence; it's a sentence *fragment*. At times, fragments are perfectly acceptable, and in this chapter I show you when you can get away with writing one. The other extreme — more than one complete sentence improperly glued together — is a *run-on sentence.* A run-on sentence — and its variation, a *comma splice* — are never okay. In fact, they're grammatical felonies. Never fear: in this chapter I explain how to join ideas without risking a visit from the Grammar Police. I also provide everything you need to know about *endmarks*, the punctuation separating one sentence from another.

Completing Sentences: The Essential Subjects and Verbs

A complete sentence has at least one subject–verb pair. They're a pair because they match. They both enjoy long walks on the beach, singing in the rain, and making fun of American Idol contestants. Just kidding. They match because, well, they work smoothly as a team. One half of the pair (the verb)

expresses action or being, and the other half (the subject) is whatever or whoever does the action or exists in the state of being. (For more information on verbs, see Chapters 2 and 3; for more information on subjects, see Chapter 4.) A few subject–verb pairs that match are

Eggworthy scrambled

Ms. Drydock has repaired

Eva will be

Just for comparison, here is one mismatch:

Eggworthy scrambling

When you're texting or IMing (instant messaging), space is tight. Every character counts, including spaces. Therefore, many people opt for "sentences" that contain only verbs, when the meaning is clear. Check out this "text":

Went home. Fed cow. Cleaned barn.

The missing subject, *I*, is obvious. If you're talking about someone else, however, you need to supply a subject:

Abner went home. Fed cow. Cleaned barn.

Now the person receiving the message understands that Abner did all the work, not the texter — who, of course, was too busy texting to do chores. By the way, I used capital letters in the preceding examples. Lots of people opt for lowercase only in messages like these. Check out Chapter 15 for a guide to capitalization and electronic media.

You may find some mismatches in your sentences when you go subject–verb hunting. Mismatches are not necessarily wrong; they're simply not subject–verb pairs. Take a look at the preceding mismatch, this time inside its sentence:

Eggworthy, scrambling for a seat on the plane, knocked over the omelet plate.

When you're checking a sentence for completeness, ignore the mismatches. Keep looking until you find a subject–verb pair that belongs together. If you can't find one, you don't have a complete sentence.

Complete sentences may also include more than one subject–verb pair:

Dorothy fiddled while the orchestra pit burned. (*Dorothy* = subject of the verb *fiddled, orchestra pit* = subject of the verb *burned*)

Because Lester jumped on the trampoline, the earth shook. (*Lester* = subject of the verb *jumped, earth* = subject of the verb *shook*)

Not only did George swim, but he also sipped the pool water. (*George* = subject of the verb *did swim, he* = subject of the verb *sipped*)

Complete sentences may also match one subject with more than one verb, and vice versa:

The lizard with a British accent appeared in three commercials but sang in only two. (*lizard* = subject of verbs *appeared, sang*)

Alice and Archie will fight endlessly over a single birdseed. (*Alice, Archie* = subjects of the verb *will fight*)

Roger and I put crayons on the radiator. (*Roger, I* = subjects of the verb *put*)

Complete sentences that give commands may match an understood subject (you) with the verb:

Give me a coupon. (*you-understood* = subject of the verb *give*)

Visit Grandma, you little creep! (*you-understood* = subject of the verb *visit*)

To find the subject–verb pair, start with the verb. Pop the verb question: *What's happening?* or *What is?* The answer is the verb. Then pop the subject question: Ask *who?* or *what?* in front of the verb. The answer is the subject. (For a more complete explanation, see Chapter 4.)

The sentence below contains one true subject–verb pair and one mismatch. Can you find the subject–verb pair?

The angry ant caught in a blob of glue vowed never to walk near a model airplane again.

Answer: The subject–verb pair is *ant vowed.* The mismatch is *ant caught.* The sentence isn't saying that the *ant caught* something, so *ant caught* is not a match.

In the preceding pop quiz, *to* walk is not the verb. *To walk* is an infinitive, the basic form from which verbs are made. Infinitives never function as verbs in a sentence. (See Chapter 2 for more information on infinitives.)

Complete Thoughts, Complete Sentences

What's an incomplete sentence? It's the moment in the television show just before the last commercial. You know what I mean. *The hero slowly edges the door open a few inches, peeks in, gasps, and . . . FADE TO DANCING DETERGENT BOTTLE.* You were planning to change the channel, but instead you wait to see if the villain's cobra is going to bite the hero's nose. You haven't gotten to the end, and you don't know what's happening. A complete sentence is the opposite of that moment in a television show. You have gotten to the end, and you do know what's happening. In other words, a complete sentence must express a complete thought. (You've probably noticed that grammar terminology is not terribly original; in fact, it's terribly obvious.)

Check out these complete sentences. Notice how they express complete thoughts:

> Despite Eggworthy's fragile appearance, he proved to be a tough opponent.
>
> Ms. Drydock will sail solo around the world, as soon as her boat stops leaking.
>
> I can't imagine why anyone would want to ride on top of a Zamboni.
>
> Did Lola apply for a job as a Zamboni driver?

For comparison, here are a few incomplete thoughts:

> The reason I wanted a divorce was.
>
> Because I said so.

I can guess what you're thinking. Both of those incomplete thoughts may be part of a longer conversation. Yes, in context those incomplete thoughts may indeed express a complete thought:

> Sydney: So the topic of conversation was the Rangers' season opener?
>
> Alice: No! "The reason I wanted a divorce" was!

and

> Sydney: Why do I have to do this dumb homework?
>
> Alice: Because I said so.

Fair enough. You can pull a complete thought out of the examples. However, the context of a conversation is not enough to satisfy the complete thought/complete sentence rule. To be "legal," your sentence must express a complete thought.

Check out these examples:

> The reason I wanted a divorce was what we discussed, even though his real interest was the Rangers' season opener.
>
> You have to do this dumb homework because I said so.

Final answer: Every complete sentence has at least one subject–verb pair and must express a complete thought.

In deciding whether you have a complete sentence or not, you may be led astray by words that resemble questions. Consider these three words: *who knits well.* A complete thought? Maybe yes, maybe no. Suppose those three words form a question:

> Who knits well?

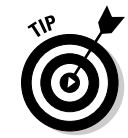
This question is understandable and its thought is complete. Verdict: legal. Suppose these three words form a statement:

> Who knits well.

Now they don't make sense. This incomplete sentence needs more words to make a complete thought:

> The honor of making Fido's sweater will go to the person who knits well.

The moral of the story? Don't change the meaning of what you're saying when deciding whether a thought is complete. If you're *questioning,* consider your sentence as a *question.* If you're *stating,* consider your sentence as a *statement.*



Occasionally a complete sentence ends with an ellipsis — three spaced dots. Such sentences show up in dramatic works, to add suspense or to indicate hesitation or confusion. These sentences appear incomplete, but because they fulfill the author's purpose, they *are* complete. For more information on ellipses, see "Oh, Mama, Could This Really Be the End?" later in this chapter.

Which sentence is complete?

A. Martin sings.

B. Martin, who hopes to sing professionally some day but can't get beyond the do-re-mi level.

Answer: Even though it is short, sentence A is complete. *Martin sings* is a complete idea and includes the necessary subject–verb pair. In sentence B, one subject is paired with two verbs *(who + hopes, can get),* but no complete thought is stated.

Why clarity is important

One of my favorite moments in teaching came on a snowy January day. A student named Danny ran into the lunchroom, clearly bursting with news. "Guess what?" he shouted triumphantly to his friends. "A kid on my bus's mother had a baby last night!"

This situation wasn't critical. After all, the baby had already been born. But imagine if Danny had been greeting an ambulance with "Quick! Over here! A kid on my bus's mother is having a baby!" I think everyone agrees that the best reaction from an emergency medical technician isn't "Huh?"

Being clear is probably the first rule of English grammar, and that rule wins a fight with any other rule. Faced with a choice between confusion and incomplete sentences, for example, incomplete sentences win. Here's the news Danny should have spread that cold January day:

> This kid on my bus? His mother had a baby last night.

Of course, he could also have told his story correctly by saying:

> The mother of a kid on my bus had a baby last night.

Either way, everyone would've yawned, eaten another bite of mystery meat, and filed out to math class. Hearing either of these statements, the students would've understood what Danny was trying to say.

So remember: First comes meaning. Second comes everything else.

Combining Sentences

Listen to the nearest toddler and you may hear something like "I played with the clay and I went to the zoo and Mommy said I had to take a nap and . . ." and so forth. Monotonous, yes. But — surprise, surprise — grammatically correct. Take a look at how the information would sound if that one sentence turned into three: *I played with the clay. I went to the zoo. Mommy said I had to take a nap.* The information sounds choppy. When the sentences are combined, the information flows more smoothly. Granted, joining everything with *and* is not a great idea. Read on for better ways of attaching one sentence to another.

Standardized test-makers enjoy plopping run-on sentences and comma splices into paragraphs and checking whether you can identify the run-ons as grammatically incorrect. (A run-on sentence is two or more complete thoughts joined improperly. A comma splice is a run-on in which a comma attempts to unite two complete thoughts.) Teachers who score the writing section of the SAT also frown on run-ons and comma splices. The best way to avoid this type of grammar error is to figure out how to connect sentences legally, as explained in this section.

Connecting with coordinate conjunctions

The words used to join words or longer expressions are called *conjunctions.* You're familiar with these common words: *for, but, yet, so, nor, and,* and *or.* (*And* is the most popular, for those of you keeping track.) These little powerhouses, which are called *coordinate conjunctions,* eat their spinach and lift weights every day. Their healthful habits make them strong enough to join complete sentences. They may also unite all sorts of equal grammatical elements. Here they are in action, joining complete sentences:

> The rain pelted Abner's gray hair, *and* his green velvet shoes were completely ruined.
>
> The CEO told Tanya to text the address of the restaurant to everyone, *but* Tanya had no idea where the restaurant was.
>
> You can take a hike, *or* you can jump off a cliff.
>
> Ben did not know how to shoe a horse, *nor* did he understand equine psychology.
>
> The townspeople lined the streets, *for* they had heard a rumor about Lady Godiva.

The coordinate conjunctions give equal emphasis to the elements they join. In the preceding sentences, the ideas on one side of the conjunction have no more importance than the ideas on the other side of the conjunction.

When the conjunctions *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, and *for* unite two complete sentences, a comma precedes the conjunction. For the lowdown on commas, turn to Chapter 13.

Some words appear to be strong enough to join sentences, but in reality they're just a bunch of 98-pound weaklings. Think of these words as guys who stuff socks in their sleeves, creating biceps without the hassle of going to the gym. These fellows may look good, but the minute you need them to pick up a truck or something, they're history. False joiners include *however, consequently, therefore, moreover, also,* and *furthermore.* Use these words to add meaning to your sentences but not to glue the sentences together. When you see these words on a standardized exam, be careful! A favorite test-maker trick is to plop these words into a run-on. Take a look at these examples:

> RUN-ON: Levon gobbled the birdseed, consequently, Robbie had nothing to eat.
>
> CORRECTED VERSION #1: Levon gobbled the birdseed; consequently, Robbie had nothing to eat.
>
> CORRECTED VERSION #2: Levon gobbled the birdseed. Consequently, Robbie had nothing to eat.

Notice the semicolon in the first corrected sentence? Semicolons are equivalent to coordinate conjunctions. According to the Official Grammarian's Rule Book (which doesn't exist), semicolons can join two complete sentences under certain conditions. See the next section for more details.

With your sharp eyes, you probably spotted a comma after *consequently* in each of the preceding examples. Grammarians argue about whether you must place a comma after a false joiner. (For the record, false joiners are *conjunctive adverbs.* No one in the entire universe needs to know that term.) Some grammarians say that the comma is necessary. Others (I'm one) see the comma as optional — a question of personal style. This is the sort of argument that makes grammarians ideal candidates for Nerds Anonymous.

Attaching thoughts: Semicolons

The semicolon is a funny little punctuation mark; it functions as a pit stop between one idea and another. It's not as strong as a period, which in Britain is called a "full stop" because, well, that's what a period does. It stops the reader. A semicolon lets the reader take a rest, but just for a moment. This punctuation mark is strong enough to attach one complete sentence to another.

I've seen writing manuals that proclaim, "Never use semicolons!" with the same intensity of feeling as, say, "Don't blow up the world with that nuclear missile." Other people can't get enough of them, sprinkling them like confetti on New Year's. As far as I'm concerned, use them if you like them. Ignore them if you don't.

If you do put a semicolon in your sentence, be sure to attach related ideas. Here's an example:

> RIGHT: Grover was born in Delaware; he moved to Virginia when he was four.
>
> WRONG: I put nonfat yogurt into that soup; I like Stephen King's books.

In the first example, both parts of the sentence are about Grover's living arrangements. In the second, those two ideas are, to put it mildly, not in the same universe. (At least not until Stephen King writes a book about a killer container of yogurt. It could happen.)

Punctuate the following, adding or subtracting words as needed:

> Abner will clip the thorns from that rose stem he is afraid of scratching himself.

Answer: Many combinations are possible, including these two:

Abner will clip the thorns from that rose stem. He is afraid of scratching himself.

Abner will clip the thorns from that rose stem; he is afraid of scratching himself.

Boss and Employee: Joining Ideas of Unequal Ranks

In the average company, the boss runs the show. The boss has subordinates who play two important roles. They must do at least some work, and they must make the boss feel like the center of the universe. Leave the boss alone in the office, and everything's fine. Leave the employees alone in the office, and pretty soon someone is swinging from the light fixture.

Some sentences resemble companies. The "boss" part of a sentence is all right by itself; it expresses a complete thought. The "employee" can't stand alone; it's an incomplete thought. (In case you're into grammar lingo: the boss is an *independent clause*, and the employee is a *subordinate clause*. For more information on independent and subordinate clauses, see Chapter 24.) Together, the "boss" and the "employee" create a more powerful sentence. Check out some examples:

BOSS: Jack ate the bagel.

EMPLOYEE: After he had picked out all the raisins.

JOINING 1: Jack ate the bagel after he had picked out all the raisins.

JOINING 2: After he had picked out all the raisins, Jack ate the bagel.

BOSS: George developed the secret microfilm.

EMPLOYEE: Because he felt traitorous.

JOINING 1: George developed the secret microfilm because he felt traitorous.

JOINING 2: Because he felt traitorous, George developed the secret microfilm.

BOSS: The book bag is in the garage.

EMPLOYEE: That Larry lost.

JOINING: The book bag that Larry lost is in the garage.

The joined example sentences are grammatically legal because they contain at least one complete thought, which can stand on its own as a complete sentence.

Whether or if it rains

Whether and *if* both connect one idea to another in a sentence, but each is used in a different situation. Are you choosing between two alternatives? Select *whether,* as in *whether or not.* Look at the following examples:

George is not sure *whether* he should activate the wind machine. (He has two choices — to activate or not to activate.)

Whether I go or stay is completely irrelevant to me. (Two choices — going and staying.)

If, on the other hand, describes a possibility. Check out these examples:

Lulu will reach the top of Mount Everest *if* the sunny weather continues. (The sentence talks about the possibility of sunny weather and Lulu's successful climb.)

If I have my way, the Grammarians' Ball will be held at the Participle Club. (The sentence talks about the possibility of my having what I want and the location of the world's most boring event.)

Choosing subordinate conjunctions

The conjunctions in the boss–employee type of sentence I describe in the preceding section do double duty. These conjunctions emphasize that one idea (the "boss," an independent clause, the equivalent of a complete sentence) is more important than the other (the "employee" or subordinate clause). The conjunctions joining boss and employee give some information about the relationship between the two ideas. These conjunctions are called *subordinate conjunctions.* Some common subordinate conjunctions are *while, because, although, though, since, when, where, if, whether, before, until, than, as, as if, in order that, so that, whenever,* and *wherever.* (Whew!)

Check out how conjunctions are used in these examples:

Sentence 1: Michael was shaving. (not a very important activity)

Sentence 2: The earthquake destroyed the city. (a rather important event)

If these two sentences are joined as equals with a coordinate conjunction, the writer emphasizes both events:

Michael was shaving, *and* the earthquake destroyed the city.

Grammatically, the sentence is legal. Morally, this statement poses a problem. Do you really think that Michael's avoidance of five o'clock shadow is equal in importance to an earthquake that measures 7 on the Richter scale? Better to join these clauses as unequals with the help of a subordinate conjunction, making the main idea about the earthquake the boss:

While Michael was shaving, the earthquake destroyed the city.

or

The earthquake destroyed the city *while* Michael was shaving.

The *while* gives you *time* information, attaches the employee sentence to the boss sentence, and shows the greater importance of the earthquake. Not bad for five letters.

Here's another:

Sentence 1: Esther must do her homework now.

Sentence 2: Mom is on the warpath.

In combining these two ideas, you have a few decisions to make. First of all, if you put them together as equals, the reader will wonder why you're mentioning both statements at the same time:

Esther must do her homework now, *but* Mom is on the warpath.

This joining may mean that Mom is running around the house screaming at the top of her lungs. Although Esther has often managed to concentrate on her history homework while blasting heavy metal music at mirror-shattering levels, she finds that concentrating is impossible during Mom's tantrums. Esther won't get anything done until Mom settles down with a cup of tea. That's one possible meaning of this joined sentence. But why leave your reader guessing? Try another joining:

Esther must do her homework now *because* Mom is on the warpath.

This sentence is much clearer: Esther's mother got one of those little pink notes from the teacher *(Number of missing homeworks: 323).* Esther knows that if she wants to survive through high school graduation, she'd better get to work now. One more joining to check:

Mom is on the warpath *because* Esther must do her homework now.

Okay, in this version Esther's mother has asked her daughter to clean the garage. She's been asking Esther every day for the last two years. Now the health inspector is due and Mom's really worried. But Esther told her that she couldn't clean up now because she had to do her homework. World War III erupted immediately.

Do you see the power of these joining words? These conjunctions strongly influence the meanings of the sentences.

Being that I like grammar

Many people say *being that* to introduce a reason. Unfortunately, *being that* is a grammatical felony in the first degree (if there are degrees of grammatical felonies — I'm a grammarian, not a lawyer). Here's the issue: People use *being that* as a subordinate conjunction, but *being that* is not acceptable, at least in formal English usage. Try *because.* For example:

WRONG: *Being that* it was Thanksgiving, Mel bought a turkey.

RIGHT: *Because* it was Thanksgiving, Mel bought a turkey.

WRONG: The turkey shed a tear or two, *being that* it was Thanksgiving.

RIGHT: The turkey shed a tear or two, *because* it was Thanksgiving.

You may like the sound of *since* in the sample sentences. Increasingly, *since* is being used as a synonym for *because,* and so far civilization as we know it hasn't crumbled. The grammarians who like to predict the end of the world because of such issues have a problem with the *since/because* connection. They prefer to use *since* for time statements:

I haven't seen the turkey *since* the ax came out of the box.

Since you've been gone, I've begun an affair with Bill Bailey.

Another grammatical no-no is *irregardless.* I think *irregardless* is popular because it's a long word that feels good when you say it. Those *r's* just roll right off the tongue. Sadly, *irregardless* is not a conjunction. It's not even a word, according to the rules of formal English. Use *regardless* (not nearly so much fun to pronounce) or *despite the fact that.*

WRONG: Irregardless, we are going to eat you, you turkey!

RIGHT: Regardless, we are going to eat you, you turkey!

ALSO RIGHT: Despite the fact that you are a tough old bird, we are going to eat you, you turkey!

Employing Pronouns to Combine Sentences

A useful trick for combining short sentences legally is "the pronoun connection." (A *pronoun* substitutes for a noun, which is a word for a person, place, thing, or idea. See Chapter 9 for more information.) Check out these combinations:

Sentence 1: Amy read the book.

Sentence 2: The book had a thousand pictures in it.

Joining: Amy read the book *that* had a thousand pictures in it.

Sentence 1: The paper map stuck to Wilbur's shoe.

Sentence 2: We plan to use the map to take over the world.

Joining: The paper map, *which* we plan to use to take over the world, stuck to Wilbur's shoe.

Sentence 1: Margaret wants to hire a carpenter.

Sentence 2: The carpenter will build a new ant farm for her pets.

Joining: Margaret wants to hire a carpenter *who* will build a new ant farm for her pets.

Sentence 1: The tax bill was passed yesterday.

Sentence 2: The tax bill will lower taxes for the top .00009% income bracket.

Joining: The tax bill *that* was passed yesterday will lower taxes for the top .00009% income bracket.

Alternate joining: The tax bill that was passed yesterday will lower taxes for Bill Gates. (Okay, I interpreted a little.)

That, which, and *who* are pronouns. In the combined sentences, each takes the place of a noun. *(That* replaces *book, which* replaces *map, who* replaces *carpenter, that* replaces *tax bill.)* These pronouns serve as thumbtacks, attaching a subordinate or less important idea to the main body of the sentence. For grammar trivia contests: *that, which,* and *who* (as well as *whom* and *whose*) are pronouns that may relate one idea to another. When they do that job, they are called relative pronouns.

Relative pronouns — like real relatives, at least in some families! — can cause lots of problems. Therefore, the SAT and ACT hit this topic hard. Chapter 23 tells you everything you need to know about relative pronouns.

Combine these sentences with a pronoun.

Sentence 1: Charlie slowly tiptoed toward the poisonous snakes.

Sentence 2: The snakes soon bit Charlie right on the tip of his nose.

Answer: Charlie slowly tiptoed toward the poisonous snakes, *which* soon bit Charlie right on the tip of his nose. The pronoun *which* replaces *snakes* in sentence 2.