



Sentence Construction

What is a sentence?

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What is a sentence?

A sentence is the basic unit of written English communication.¹

A sentence is a **collection of words** assembled in such an order that they present a **complete thought or idea**.²



What is a sentence?

A sentence begins with a **capital letter** and ends with a **punctuation mark**. The type of punctuation mark terminating the sentence indicates the kind of sentence.

- A **declarative sentence**, one that makes a statement, ends in a period.
- An **interrogative sentence**, one that asks a question, ends in a question mark.
- An **exclamatory sentence**, one that makes a forceful utterance, ends in an exclamation mark (or point).³



A sentence contains a **subject** and a **predicate**.

- The subject is the **noun** (person, place, or thing) doing or being something.
- The predicate contains the **verb**, which identifies what the subject is doing or being.⁴



A simple sentence contains a single subject and a single predicate.⁵

- “The man rode the bicycle.” In this example, “The man” is the subject, and “rode the bicycle” is the predicate.



Adding descriptive elements makes the sentence more interesting as it gives the reader or listener more information.⁶

- “The young man skillfully rode the red bicycle.” In this example, the **adjective** “young” describes “the man,” the **adverb** “skillfully” describes how he “rode,” and the **adjective** “red” describes “the bicycle.”

Note: Adding descriptive elements does not change the simple sentence into a compound or a complex sentence.



Sentences contain clauses.

- A clause contains a subject and a predicate.
- An independent clause expresses a complete thought.⁷
- A simple sentence is an independent clause.⁸



A compound sentence is made up of two or more independent clauses combined using a coordinating conjunction such as and, or, or but.⁹



“The man rode the bicycle, but he went the wrong way.” In this example, “The man rode the bicycle” and “he went the wrong way” are independent clauses.

Each independent clause can stand alone as a complete sentence. For example, “The man rode the bicycle. He went the wrong way.”

For a more complete presentation on conjunctions, please refer to the Online Writing Center website <http://www.liberty.edu/academics/graduate/writing/index.cfm?PID=17176>.



A **complex sentence** contains more than one subject and more than one verb.

It is made up of more than one clause: an independent clause and a **dependent clause**.¹⁰

A dependent, or subordinate, clause contains a subject and a predicate but **does not express a complete thought**.

A dependent clause often begins with a **subordinating conjunction** or **relative pronoun** that make the clause unable to stand alone.¹¹



For example, “because he was lost” cannot stand alone. The subordinating conjunction “because” makes this a dependent clause.

Another example, “that he found in the garage” cannot stand alone. The relative pronoun “that” makes this a dependent clause.

For a more complete presentation on conjunctions and pronouns, please refer to the Online Writing Center website: <http://www.liberty.edu/academics/graduate/writing/index.cfm?PID=17176> .



A complex sentence joins an independent and a dependent clause.¹²

“The man went the wrong way because he was lost.” In this example, “The man went the wrong way” is an independent clause; “because he was lost” is a dependent clause.

“The man rode the bicycle that he found in the garage.” In this example, “The man rode the bicycle” is an independent clause; “that he found in the garage” is a dependent clause.



A compound-complex sentence is made from two independent clauses and one or more dependent clauses.¹³

“Although he likes to ride his bicycle, the man has not had the time to ride lately, and he has not found anyone to ride with.”

Can you identify the dependent and independent clauses?



In the previous example, “Although he likes to ride his bicycle” is the dependent clause. “The man has not had the time to ride lately” and “he has not found anyone to ride with” are the independent clauses.

Compound-complex sentences are fairly common in written English.

Students often make the mistake of attempting to write compound-complex sentences without having mastered the simple, compound, and complex sentences.



Sentence Variety

Consider varying the types of sentences used to achieve the desired effect.¹⁴

- Short simple sentences attract attention.
- Compound sentences invite comparison.
- Complex sentences show relationships and priorities.
- Compound-complex sentences provide lots of information.



Resources

- Liberty University's Online Writing Center
 - <http://www.liberty.edu/academics/graduate/writing/index.cfm?PID=17176>
- Purdue University's Online Writing Lab
 - <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>
- *The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation* by Jane Straus
 - <http://www.grammarbook.com>



Endnotes

1. John M. Kierzek and Walker Gibson, *The MacMillan Handbook of English*, 5th ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1965), 48.
2. Gordon Loberger and Kate Shoup, *Webster's New World English Grammar Handbook*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2009), 144.
3. Mark Lester and Larry Beason, *The McGraw-Hill Handbook of English Grammar and Usage* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 46-47.
4. Loberger and Shoup, *The McGraw-Hill Handbook*, 183-184.
5. Lester and Beason, *Webster's New World English Grammar Handbook*, 70.
6. Ibid., 86.
7. Loberger and Shoup, *The McGraw-Hill Handbook*, 48-49.
8. Kierzek and Gibson, *The MacMillan Handbook of English*, 48.
9. Lester and Beason, *Webster's New World English Grammar Handbook*, 70.
10. Ibid.
11. Loberger and Shoup, *The McGraw-Hill Handbook*, 48.
12. Lester and Beason, *Webster's New World English Grammar Handbook*, 70.
13. Ibid., 71.
14. Kierzek and Gibson, *The MacMillan Handbook of English*, 429-430.