

Sentences

Identifying what is and is not a correct sentence can sometimes seem confusing, because there are so many possibilities. After all, a sentence can be a single word or it can be dozens of words. So, how can we tell if a particular group of words is a complete sentence? It all comes down to three basic elements that any sentence, no matter how long or how short, must have: an action, an actor, and the ability to stand alone.

The three A's: Action, Actor, Stands Alone

Action

Often referred to as verbs, these are the words that show what is happening in a given sentence. Some action words are pretty obvious, like ran, walked, typed, baked, gave, took, and thousands of other possibilities. Other action words are a bit more subtle, like the forms of "be" (am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been). These don't seem so active, but they are actions nonetheless.

Actor

Sometimes known as the subject, the actor is the doer of the action. Consider the following sentence: *Jill smiled.*

This two-word sentence has an action (smiled) and an actor (Jill).

Actors are usually pretty easy to identify, but, while actors usually show up before the action, this isn't always the case. Consider the following sentence: *The book was read by Joe.* There is an action (was read). But what word represents the doer of the action? It's not the book that was reading; it's Joe that was reading. This is an example of a passive form of a sentence (where the action precedes the actor). (See "Active and Passive Voice" under the Online Writing Center's "Crafting Your Message." So, the actor doesn't always precede the action.

Another situation in which the actor may be difficult to spot is when the word "you" is the actor, but does not appear in the sentence. Consider the following sentence: *Shut the door.* This sentence has an action (shut), and if you told this to the person sitting next to you, she or he would know what to do. (It expresses a complete thought, as described below). The actor in this sentence is "you" even though the word does not appear in the sentence. So beware of the word "you." It's sometimes there, even when it isn't.

Stands Alone

This is the tricky part. In addition to having action and an actor, to be a sentence, a group of words must have the ability to stand as a complete thought. In other words, you should be able to recite that group of words out loud and your listener should be able to comprehend your message. For example, consider the following group of words:
"Fran took out the garbage."

You could turn to the person next to you and say, "Fran took out the garbage."

The person sitting next to you would turn to you and say, "Oh, thanks for sharing."

What you've shared with the person sitting next to you is a complete sentence. It has an action (took), an actor (Fran), and the person sitting next to you could process what you had to say. She or he might wonder who Fran is and why you're sharing this bit of information, but that doesn't matter; what does matter is that you've expressed a complete thought. (Incidentally, a simple, complete sentence is sometimes referred to as an "independent clause." It is called independent because it expresses a complete thought all by itself.

On the other hand, consider the following group of words: *After Fran took out the garbage.*

The action (took) is still there, as is the actor (Fran).

Again, you could turn to the person sitting next to you and say, "After Fran took out the garbage."

The person sitting next to you would turn to you and say, "What happened after Fran took out the garbage?"

What you've shared with the person sitting next to you is not a complete thought. The addition of the word "after" to this group of words has turned what was a sentence into a non-sentence. This is an example of a "dependent clause" and it causes problems for a lot of people. Dependent clauses are often mistaken for sentences because they have an actor and an action. The problem is that they don't express a complete thought. The result is what is often called a sentence fragment.

Fragments

A fragment is less than a complete sentence. Once you are comfortable identifying the three elements that must be in a sentence (actor, action, ability to stand alone), identifying fragments becomes relatively easy; a fragment lacks one or more of the three elements. In fact, a fragment will always lack the ability to stand alone. The following are examples of fragments:

- The girl sitting in back
- Yesterday, while I was at the store
- The one with the red polka dots

The trick is to "hear" the group of words you are calling a sentence to see if they express a complete thought. Hear yourself turning to the person next to you and saying, "The girl in the back."

The person next to you replies, "What about her?" You haven't expressed a complete thought. The same is true of the other two examples.

If you have trouble with fragments, try reading your work out loud. (If you're concerned that people will question your sanity, do this in a location where there is no one else around.) Read one alleged sentence at a time. With practice, you will start to identify those groups of words that are less than a sentence.

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Updated 5-31-13