

## SENTENCE FRAGMENTS

Simply put, a sentence fragment is a group of words that is not a complete sentence but is punctuated as if it were.

- **DEPENDENT-WORD FRAGMENTS**

Dependent words connect word groups with the main sentence. The most common dependent words are prepositions (*across, over*), subordinating conjunctions (*after, even, although*), and relative pronouns (*that, who, which*).

A word group starting with a preposition is called a prepositional phrase. A word group starting with a subordinating conjunction is called a subordinate clause. A word group starting with a relative pronoun is called a relative clause. Neither of these can stand alone as a sentence; therefore, it has to be attached to the main sentence. If it stands alone, it is a fragment.

- ☹ *Jake torments his wife. Over many years. (prepositional phrase; fragment)*
- ☹ *Jake torments his wife over many years.*
- ☹ *He beats Lil. Even when she begs him to stop. (subordinate clause; fragment)*
- ☹ *He beats Lil even when she begs him to stop.*
- ☹ *Jake is angry at the world. Which has turned against him. (relative clause; fragment)*
- ☹ *Jake is angry at the world, which has turned against him.*

- **-ING AND -ED FRAGMENTS**

The -ing form of a verb is called the **present participle**. You use it to form progressive tenses, tenses that describe the progress of an action (I am *watching* television while the child is *sleeping*. Tom was *taking* a shower when the phone rang.)

The **past participle** of a verb ends in -ed. With irregular verbs, the past participle is the third form of the verb (*go-went-gone*). It is used to form perfect tenses and passives (I was extremely *depressed*. The story made sense once it had been *explained*.)

✍ When writers are in a hurry, they sometimes **drop the subject and the "is" or "was."** They end up with a telegram style of writing that might work in a personal journal but will not work in an essay:

☹ *Annoyed with his wife. Feeling hungover. Reading the mail. Waiting for breakfast.*

You correct these fragments by **adding a subject and the appropriate helping verb to make the sentence a complete thought.**

☺ *Jake is annoyed with his wife. He is feeling hungover. Jake is reading the mail and waiting for breakfast.*

✍ If a word group containing an -ing verb stands alone, it is a fragment and needs to be attached to the sentence that comes before or after, whichever makes more sense.

- ☹ *Jake hangs out with his friends. Waiting for his shift at the post office to start.*
- ☺ *Jake hangs out with his friends waiting for his shift at the post office to start.*
- ☹ *Standing at his work station. Jake talks to his friends about women and religion.*
- ☺ *Standing at this work station, Jake talks about women and religion.*

- **"TO" FRAGMENTS**

A verb that has "to" in front of it is called the **infinitive** of that verb: *to work, to sleep*. Infinitives are the "pure" form of the verb; they do not show tense or person. They always have to be combined with another verb to become the predicate of a sentence: *I told you to leave me alone. Thomas wants to go to his friend's house.*

When infinitives are combined with other words, we call this an **infinitive phrase**. Just like other phrases and subordinate clauses, infinitive phrases cannot stand by themselves. You correct these fragments by attaching the phrase to the sentence before or after it, whichever makes more sense.

- Ⓒ *Jake borrows money from his boss. To pay his bills. He spends most of it on alcohol, food, and prostitutes.*
- Ⓒ *Jake borrows money from his boss to pay his bills. He spends most of it on alcohol, food, and prostitutes.*
- Ⓒ *His wallet gets stolen. To find his money. He checks every room in the bar.*
- Ⓒ *His wallet gets stolen. To find his money, he checks every room in the bar.*

- **ADDED-DETAIL FRAGMENTS**

Added-detail fragments lack a subject and a verb. They often begin with one of the following words: *also, especially, except, for example, including, such as, etc.* You fix them by attaching the fragment to the sentence that comes before it or add a subject and verb to the fragment to turn it into a complete sentence.

- Ⓒ *Jake accuses everyone of taking his money. Except for his friends.*
- Ⓒ *Jake accuses everyone of taking his money, except for his friends.*
- Ⓒ *Blue Juice punches Jake. Also throws him out of the bar.*
- Ⓒ *Blue Juice punches Jake. Also, he throws Jake out of the bar.*

- **MISSING-SUBJECT FRAGMENTS**

Missing-subject fragments happen when writers add verb phrases to an already existing sentence and treat them as if they were complete sentences. You fix these fragments by adding them to the previous sentence or by giving them a subject to make them complete.

- Ⓒ *Bob, Al, and Slim carry Jake out of the bar. But can't wake him up.*
- Ⓒ *Bob, Al, and Slim carry Jake out of the bar but can't wake him up.*
- Ⓒ *Jake finally wakes up and goes home. Then gets stabbed.*
- Ⓒ *Jake finally wakes up and goes home. Then he gets stabbed.*

**The best way to check for fragments is to proof-read your paper backwards, from the last sentence to the first. This way, you will easily catch a sentence that does not make sense because it needs to be attached to the sentence before.**

► Did you like the sample sentences? Get the whole story in Richard Wright's *Lawd Today*.