Sentence Structure

As is the case with many aspects of writing, sentence structure is conventional: the rules that govern the structure of English sentences are neither absolute nor arbitrary. Understanding the conventions for structuring sentences allows writers to communicate information clearly and effectively. We all implicitly rely on these conventions when reading, so we should be aware of how the structure of our own sentences will affect the clarity of what we write. Put simply, sentence structure is a tool for making effective use of our audience’s expectations, and our primary goal in approaching sentence structure should always be improving the clarity of our ideas.

Clauses and Sentence Structure

English sentences can be grouped into four basic types of sentence structure: simple, compound, complex and compound-complex. These classifications indicate the number of clauses in the sentence and the relationships between those clauses. Most effective writing styles make use of all four types of sentence structure.

A clause consists of a subject (the noun, person or object that performs the action), a predicate (the verb or action performed) and any objects or modifiers (direct objects, predicate nominatives, adverbs, adjectives, prepositional phrases, etc.) that attach to the subject and predicate. For instance, “Sam grunted” is a two-word clause containing a subject (Sam) and a verb (grunted). “Sam reluctantly grunted his acceptance of the new dinner plans” is a ten-word clause with the same subject and verb along with a direct object (acceptance), an adverb (reluctantly) and a prepositional phrase acting as an adjective (of the new dinner plans). Each one is a clause because it has a subject and a verb.

Simple Sentences

A simple sentence is a single clause that expresses a complete thought; it is also known as an independent clause because it can stand on its own. Every English sentence includes at least one independent clause. A simple sentence can have compound subjects (“Bill and Frank play baseball”), compound verbs (“Frank plays baseball and watches Major League games”) or even compound subjects and verbs (“Bill and Frank play baseball and watch Major League games”) as long as every subject performs every verb in the sentence. "Bill plays baseball, and Frank watches Major League games" presents a different meaning than "Bill plays baseball, but Frank watches Major League games." The first sentence emphasizes the two men’s common interest in baseball while the second sentence emphasizes the difference in their level of participation. Either compound sentence provides the reader with more information than two simple sentences made from the same clauses (“Bill plays baseball. Frank watches Major League games”). A simple sentence displays the relationship between two facts, actions or ideas, and it presents the information communicated by each clause as having equal importance. (For more information on joining independent clauses, see our handout on “Semicolons and Colons.”)

Compound Sentences

A compound sentence consists of two independent clauses joined by a comma and conjunction, a semicolon, or a colon. The relationship between the two thoughts is most often communicated by the conjunction that joins the clauses together. For instance, "Bill plays baseball, and Frank watches Major League games" presents a different meaning than "Bill plays baseball, but Frank watches Major League games." The first sentence emphasizes the two men’s common interest in baseball while the second sentence emphasizes the difference in their level of participation. Either compound sentence provides the reader with more information than two simple sentences made from the same clauses ("Bill plays baseball. Frank watches Major League games"). A compound sentence displays the relationship between two facts, actions or ideas, and it presents the information communicated by each clause as having equal importance. (For more information on joining independent clauses, see our handout on “Semicolons and Colons.”)
Complex Sentences

A **complex sentence** consists of one independent clause with one or more dependent clauses. A **dependent clause** is a subject/verb cluster that does not express a complete thought and cannot stand alone as a simple sentence. Dependent clauses are also known as **subordinate clauses** because the information they express is subordinated to (presented as less important than) the information in the sentence's independent clause. Dependent clauses often contain background information or information that presents the independent clause in a particular light. For instance, "Although Bill plays baseball, Frank watches Major League games" puts the emphasis on Frank's knowledge of MLB and might give us reason to believe Frank over Bill when they disagree about who Roger Clemens played for in 1998. On the other hand, "While Frank watches Major League games, Bill plays baseball" would give us reason to pick Bill over Frank in the company softball game. In each case, the subject and verb of the independent clause is the main focus of the complex sentence.

Dependent clauses always serve as nouns, adjectives or adverbs. In a **noun clause**, the entire clause acts like a single noun and can be a subject, a direct object, an appositive, an object of a preposition, etc. For example, the last clause in the sentence “A clause serves as a noun if it is the object of a preposition” is a noun clause used as the object of a preposition. In an **adjective or adverb clause**, the entire clause serves as a single modifier. If an adjective or adverb clause comes at the beginning of a sentence, it always modifies the subject of the sentence. If the clause comes anywhere else in the sentence, it modifies the verb or noun that comes immediately before the clause.

Compound-Complex Sentences

Writers can combine three or more clauses into a **compound-complex sentence**, which is a compound sentence that also includes at least one dependent clause. Every compound-complex sentence will have at least three clauses. For instance, "While Frank watches Major League games, Bill plays baseball, so we should pick Bill for our team" consists of three clauses that are dependent, independent and independent respectively. Because they place several clauses in explicit relationship to one another, compound-complex sentences can express more nuance than any other sentence structure, but their complexity can strain the reader's attention and risk possible misreading. While they are tremendously useful and sometimes necessary, they require careful planning.

Sentence Fragments and Run-ons

A **sentence fragment** is an incomplete sentence used as a sentence. While sentences are independent clauses that express complete thoughts, fragments are either 1) **partial clauses that lack either a subject or a verb** or 2) **dependent clauses that do not express a complete thought**. “Left all the lights on in the house” is a fragment lacking a subject. To complete the sentence, ask yourself who or what performs the action of the sentence and rewrite the sentence to include that actor (your subject). “Jamie left all the lights on in the house”. “Frank and a bunch of guys he knew in high school” is a fragment that lacks a verb. To complete the sentence, ask yourself what action, event or way of being your subject performs or displays and add in the appropriate verb. “Frank and a bunch of guys he knew in high school went fishing” is a complete sentence. Dependent clauses also constitute sentence fragments when they are not attached to an independent clause. For example, “When they are not attached to an independent clause” would be a sentence fragment if left on its own. While fragments can be used for stylistic effect, you should avoid fragments in most academic prose.

**Run-on sentences** have two or more independent clauses that are not joined together by a comma-conjunction pair, a semicolon, or a colon. To correct a run-on sentence, you should either add the appropriate connection (comma+conjunction, semicolon, etc.) or split the independent clauses into two or more sentences. A **comma-splice** is a specific type of run-on sentence that joins two independent clauses with a comma alone. To fix a comma-splice, add the appropriate coordinating conjunction (and, or, but, etc.).