

Eschew Obfuscation: Sentence Fragments and Run-Ons by Faye Roberts

Sentence Riddle #1:
When is a sentence not
a sentence?

Answer: When it's a fragment
or a run-on. (*Yes, this an-
swer is itself a fragment.*)

Sentence Riddle #2: Is it OK
to use fragments and run-ons
in my writing?

Answer: Sometimes.

While incomplete sentences
in formal writing are often
mistakes that annoy readers,
fragments and run-ons—if
used judiciously— can be
effective in fiction, especially
in dialogue.

This column focuses on the basic structure of the sentence and on two different forms of incomplete sentences: fragments and run-ons. As with so many things about writing, you really need to be familiar with the rules to know when to ignore them for good effect.

We all know that a sentence begins with a capital letter and ends with a period or other terminal punctuation, but a sentence is more than just a group of words. John Warriner, in *English Composition and Grammar*, explains that a group of words qualifies as a complete sentence when “it has a subject and a verb and expresses a complete thought.”

The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina, which offers a [great discussion](#) about fragments and run-ons, expands on Warriner's definition, explaining that the verb is part of the predicate. Whether a sentence is short or long, to be complete it must have all three components: subject, predicate, and that complete thought. To illustrate, here's a very short, but complete, sentence:

Kelsey ran.

The subject is *Kelsey* and the predicate is the verb *ran*. The sentence expresses the complete thought that Kelsey ran. We can make this sentence longer and more complex by adding more phrases, but that won't change the fundamental subject and predicate. Here are some longer variations.

As shots rang out, **Kelsey ran** for cover.

As shots rang out and members of the audience began to scream, **Kelsey ran** for cover behind a nearby cabinet.

In *The Chicago Guide to Grammar, Usage, and Punctuation*, author Bryan A. Garner defines *fragment* as “a group of words that, although written as a sentence, doesn't constitute a grammatically complete sentence.” Other terms for a group of words masquerading as an actual sentence include *sentence fragment*,

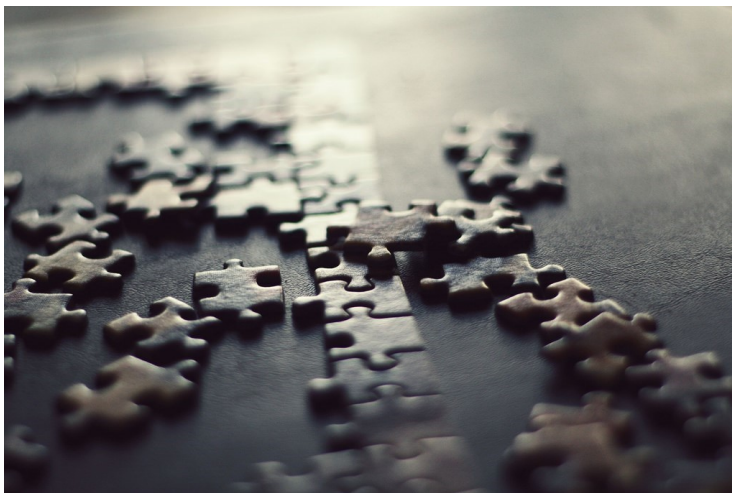


Photo by echerries via flickr

fragmentary sentence—and the ominous-sounding *period fault*.

Compare this complete, fully formed sentence with the fragments that follow.

COMPLETE SENTENCE:
After the storm, broken limbs
littered the ground.

This combination of words expresses a complete thought, the subject is *limbs*, and *littered* is the verb. Because this meets all three requirements, it passes the sentence test.

In contrast, here are two simi-

lar groups of words that are incomplete fragments.

INCOMPLETE: After the storm, broken limbs on the ground.
(While *limbs* is the subject, there's no verb.)

INCOMPLETE: After the storm, broken limbs littering the ground.
(This phrase also lacks a functioning verb. Although *littering* is a type of verb, to satisfy the verb requirement here an auxiliary or helping verb is needed, e.g., *were littering*.)

Some editors have noticed a rash of fragments in the writing they've reviewed recently. My own theory about the uptick in this number is that we often write what we hear. In fact, that's how I was taught to write in school. Today, much of what we hear includes sentence fragments. The nightly news, delivered with great energy on certain major networks, frequently presents prime examples of fragments:

“The massive storm threatening severe weather for millions of viewers!”

“The shocking news today from the state capitol!”

“Baffled law enforcement officers!”

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Eschew Obfuscation, continued

Phrases like these, especially when they're heard frequently, become familiar and may seem acceptable, but they're still fragments. Each contains a word that looks like a verb—*threatening*, *shocking*, *baffled*—but these words aren't doing the job of verbs.

With minor adjustments, though, these fragments can become the full-fledged, complete sentences desired in formal writing:

COMPLETE: A massive storm **is** threatening millions with severe weather!

COMPLETE: **There is** shocking news today from the state capitol!

COMPLETE: Law enforcement officers **are** baffled!

Often, a fragment is actually a dependent clause or a lengthy phrase that would be just fine if it were joined to an independent clause, aka a complete sentence. In the following example, the words in **bold** form a fragment:

INCOMPLETE: Mark slammed his fist against the dashboard.
Because his rattletrap truck once again failed to start.

The first statement, *Mark slammed his fist against the dashboard*, is an independent clause, i.e., a complete sentence with subject and verb. The second, *Because his rattletrap truck once again failed to start*, is a dependent clause; it's incomplete and can't stand alone. It should be attached to an independent clause.

The simple fix for this sentence is to lose the first period and join the fragment to the sentence (independent clause) that precedes it:

COMPLETE: Mark slammed his fist against the dashboard because his rattletrap truck once again failed to start.

Longer fragments can be harder to spot. In the following example, the words in **bold** again represent a fragment.

Because he caught her reading by flashlight under the blanket when she was supposed to be asleep. Emily's father made her stand in the corner on one foot until she dozed off.

The long phrase beginning with *Because he caught her* is an example of a fragment that can be difficult to recognize. Even though it has verbs (*was caught* and *was supposed*), it still isn't a complete sentence that can stand alone. The problem can be remedied by linking the fragment to the complete sentence that follows it:

COMPLETE: Because he caught her reading by flashlight under the blanket when she was supposed to be asleep, Emily's father made her stand in the corner on one foot until she dozed off.

A run-on sentence can be considered the opposite of a fragment. With a run-on, two (or even more) sentences are jammed together as if they were only one sentence. Sometimes they're linked with a comma (the *comma splice* discussed in January's "Eschew Obfuscation"), but other times they're just butted up cozily against each other with no punctuation to mediate their relationship.

Resources

Browne, Renni and Dave King. *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers: How to Edit Yourself into Print*, 2nd ed., HarperCollins, 2004.

The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina
<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/fragments-and-run-ons>

Warriner notes, "The fragment is not complete; the run-on sentence is more than complete." In other words, the fragment isn't enough to make a sentence, but the run-on is too much.

Inexperienced writers are more likely to have problems with run-on sentences that can be the result of carelessness with punctuation. A run-on sentence may also be an indication that you need to think a little more about the relationship of the words. Did one action happen before another action? Was one activity subordinate or less important than another?

Note that a run-on sentence isn't necessarily long, and long sentences aren't necessarily run-ons.

RUN-ON: It's cold outside, wear your gloves.

CORRECTED: It's cold outside. Wear your gloves (The fragments have been revised as two sentences.)

LONG, BUT GRAMMATICALLY CORRECT: The *rain*—miserably cold and accompanied by a billowing fog—*began* falling with the first, faint drops tapping against the metal exterior of the kitchen exhaust pipe, its initial pings barely discernible but gradually, inexorably increasing in speed and force until the roar of streaming water masked all other sounds.

In basic elements, the subject of this long sentence is *rain* and its verb is *began*. The sentence also contains a complete thought, although it's a certainly a lengthy and complex one.

In fiction dialogue, of course, the "rules" can be a bit different. Browne and King, authors of *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*, observe that sentence fragments can be effective in reflecting the patterns of everyday speech.

"Don't want to. Can't make me."

"Coffee, two creams."

"Right at the light. Two blocks down."

Similarly, dialogue might also include run-on sentences:

"Hurry up, we'll be in trouble if we're late."

"Shut the door, the dog will get out."

Constructing well-formed sentences can be like assembling a puzzle. Sometimes you have to move the words around, fitting them together to tell your story. It's easier to see the pattern when you understand the structure of your sentences.