



## Sentences

This guide contains information about the following common sentence structure issues, as well as some general information about simple and complex sentences.

1. Run-on sentences/comma splices
2. Sentence fragments
3. Passive voice
4. Simple sentences
5. Complex sentences
6. Verbs
7. Connecting ideas

### Run-on sentences (or comma splices)

If you get feedback telling you that you have written a 'run-on sentence' or 'comma splice', this means that the links between ideas in your sentence are not clearly made. Your sentence may be missing important punctuation or a joining word. Here is an example:



*Learning grammar and translation skills seems to me to be like a linguistic security blanket of sorts, these skills are something students can practise by themselves, and there is little danger of embarrassment in doing drills and exercises.*

The underlined bit is the problem because the link to the idea in the previous sentence is not shown.

### How to fix a run-on sentence

1. Add a joining word, such as 'because', to show that the second part of the sentence is explaining the first part.



*Learning grammar and translation skills seems to me to be like a linguistic security blanket of sorts **because** these skills are something students can practise by themselves, and there is little danger of embarrassment in doing drills and exercises.*

2. Change the comma to a full stop. In this case, the link to the previous sentence is still not very clear.



*Learning grammar and translation skills seems to me to be like a linguistic security blanket of **sorts. These** skills are something students can practise by themselves, and there is little danger of embarrassment in doing drills and exercises.*

### Sentence fragments

If you get feedback telling you that you have written a 'sentence fragment', this means that your sentence is somehow grammatically incomplete. Here are some examples:

- The sentence starts with a joining word that makes it unable to stand alone.



*Deep learning is an active process. **Whereas** surface learning is passive.*

→ The sentence uses a verb form (the '-ing' form or the 'to -' form) that makes it unable to stand alone, usually at the beginning of the sentence.



*A person may experience many difficulties during the transition period from layperson to the newly acquired role of nurse. **Requiring** a whole change of lifestyle so many adaptations must be made in order to fulfil the requirements of*



*The disease spread widely. **Thus inflicting** much suffering.*

### How to fix a sentence fragment

1. Join the two sentences together with a comma if they are not too long:



*Deep learning is an active process, whereas surface learning is passive.*



*The disease spread widely, **thus inflicting** much suffering.*

2. Change the verb form to one that can stand alone and add a Subject, e.g. from 'requiring' to 'this requires', or from 'to show' to 'this shows'.



*A person may experience many difficulties during the transition period from layperson to the newly acquired role of nurse. **This requires** a whole change of lifestyle so many adaptations must be made in order to fulfil the requirements of that role.*

### Passive voice

If you get feedback telling you that you use passive voice too much, it means you structure sentences in a way that leaves out the 'doer' of the action or leaves it to the end of the sentence. Here's an example:

Forest coverage was reduced. OR Forest coverage was reduced by wildfires.



Another way of describing this process is using the **active** voice:



### Effective use of passive voice

There are at least 3 situations when it might be appropriate to use passive voice:

1. To emphasize what was affected by the process.

(passive) **Forest coverage** was reduced.

(active) **Wildfires** reduced **forest coverage**.

2. To de-emphasize an unknown subject/actor or to conceal the doer.

(passive) **Over 120 different contaminants** have been dumped into the river.

The passive voice is necessary when the doer is unknown. We just do not know who dumped the contaminants.

(passive) **A mistake** was made.

The use of the passive voice here has taken the blame off the one who made the mistake.

- If your readers don't need to know who's responsible for the action.

(passive) **Baby Sophia** was delivered at 3:30 a.m. yesterday.

(active) Dr. Susan Jones delivered **baby Sophia** at 3:30 a.m. yesterday.

Parents announcing their child's birth would probably use passive voice instead of active because their friends want to know about the baby, not the doctor who delivered the baby.

### How to fix too much use of passive voice

- Use active voice instead.

*Forest coverage was reduced by 35%. → Wildfires reduced forest coverage by 35%.*

- Choose a different way of expressing the meaning.

*There was a 35% reduction in forest coverage as a result of wildfires.*

*Around 35% of forest coverage burned out in wildfires.*

*Wildfires led to the loss of 35% of forest coverage.*

### Simple sentences

The following sentences are **simple sentences** that describe one main action or state of being. The action is shown by the **verb**. Each sentence starts with a capital letter and ends with a full stop.

Wildfires ↑ Who/what	reduced ↑ Verb	forest coverage. ↑ What
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Indonesian land tenure ↑ Who/what	divides ↑ Verb	land ↑ What	into areas classified as State Forest and those classified as non-state forest. ↑ How/ <b>where</b> /when/why/by whom
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The rich forest and mineral resources of Kalimantan ↑ Who/what	have brought ↑ Verb	considerable wealth ↑ What	to both the Indonesian government and a host of businesses. ↑ To whom
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Rural lands in Kalimantan ↑ Who/what	are claimed ↑ Verb	by indigenous, state and private actors. ↑ How/where/when/why/ <b>by whom</b>
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High economic value tree species ↑ Who/what	are ↑ Verb	at risk of extinction ↑ What	due to highly selective logging. ↑ How/where/when/ <b>why</b> /by whom
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Kim Heckenberg (Manager)  
Linda Parker (Manager)  
Tahlia Birnbaum  
Tae McKnight  
Beverley Miles  
Sara Perley

Katrina Trewin  
Claire Urbach  
Anna Wallace  
Fiona Webber  
Lisa Worthington

## Complex sentences

The following sentences are complex sentences that describe more than one main action or state of being. Each action is described in a clause (like a simple sentence) with a verb, and the clauses are joined together.

In this example there are two clauses. Each clause describes a different type of learning. The second clause is joined to the first clause with a joining word, 'whereas'.

Deep learning	is	an active process,	whereas	surface learning	is	passive
↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Who/what	Verb	What	joining word	Who/what	Verb	What
Clause 1			Clause 2			

If	present logging practices	are continued,	the supply of timber	will run out	and	many workers	will lose	their jobs.
↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
joining word	Who/what	Verb	Who/what	Verb	joining word	Who/what	Verb	What
Clause 1			Clause 2		Clause 3			

## Verbs

Verbs describe an action, state, or occurrence. You will see in the examples above that some of the verbs are clearly actions (e.g. divides), whereas some you might not have realised were 'doing words' at all (e.g. are).

Verbs are **essential** in a sentence because when we write a sentence we are always writing about something happening, or something being a certain way, or someone doing something.

Verbs can have different forms depending on the time of the action (past, present, or future) or how the action relates to other actions described in the sentence.

## Connecting ideas in your writing

Showing relationships between your ideas will help the structure and flow of your writing.

The common joining words (conjunctions) AND, BUT, and OR join two clauses together in an equal relationship.

Other joining words connect ideas in unequal relationships. Here are some examples:

after	because	whereas
since	unless	instead of
although (or even though)	before	wherever
so that	until	once
as, as long as, as soon as	if	while
though	when	in order to, in order that

A clause that starts with one of these joining words is unable to stand alone, so make sure you join the clause to another clause to avoid sentence fragments (see above).

## More Information

For in-depth information with many examples, try the Study Smart resource: [Sentence structure](#) (PDF, 150kB).