

Sentence Structure

There are many varied purposes for writing, and they are reflected in different writing styles or 'genres'. This helpsheet looks at the basics of sentence structure in the context of formal academic writing.

Sentences in English are of three main types: **simple**, **compound** and **complex**.

Simple

- Has one main clause*

The explosion destroyed every house on the block.

*A 'clause' is the smallest grammatical unit that results in a complete sentence. This consists of a subject (noun phrase) and a predicate (contains a main verb). In the example above, the subject is 'explosion' and the verb is 'destroyed'.

Compound

- Has two or more main clauses connected by a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, for, as, so*)

Malaria is a problem in the region, but cholera is far more devastating.

In this example, two clauses 'Malaria is a problem in the region' and 'Cholera is far more devastating' are joined with a comma, and the word 'but', to make a single thought with two related parts. Compound sentences are desirable in academic writing as they make writing less "choppy", and related ideas flow.

Complex

- Has one independent clause and at least one dependent clause. One relies on the other. The main idea is in the independent clause, which creates an order of significance. This is by far the hardest type of sentence to write, however it gives your language great subtlety.

The students went to a party even though they had an assignment due.

The actor, who had made many movies, died a lonely, broken man.

In these cases, the main ideas are (respectively): 'The students went to a party' and 'The actor died a lonely, broken man'. They are the independent clauses because each can stand alone as sentences. The other clauses (dependent clauses) qualify the main clauses with further information.

Independent and dependent clauses can be connected in different ways, depending on what message you want to get across to your reader. For example, do you want to express that one idea is more important than another; or that a secondary idea is simply related to the main clause?

Subordinating conjunctions

- Words such as: because, although, if, until, while, though, after.
- These words subordinate one idea to another more important idea.

Relative pronouns

- Words such as: that, who, whose, which, whom.
- These simply relate something to the main clause (without subordination).

Order of clauses

It is important to get the order of independent and dependent clauses right. The meaning of your sentence will also be altered by using the wrong subordinating conjunction or relative pronoun. For example, compare the following sentences:

- 'The actor, who had made many movies, died a lonely, broken man.' (relative clause)
- 'Although he had made many movies, the actor died a lonely, broken man.' (subordinating clause)
- 'After he had made many movies, the actor died a lonely, broken man.' (subordinating clause)

The first (a) suggests it is incidental that he made movies. The second (b) intimates that his death is puzzling because making movies should have given him money and fame. The order and choice of relative pronoun make the third (c) read as though his death occurred following a period of movie-making!

Poor use of subordinating conjunctions = unclear writing

Generally, most native-speakers can write simple and compound sentences well. However, many have trouble with complex sentences. This usually results from poor use of subordinating conjunctions.

Tips for creating clear complex sentences

Only use subordinating conjunctions at the start of short sentences

Sentences like (b) above work with a subordinating conjunction at the start. The longer the sentence, the harder it is to control the meaning. Starting a sentence with 'Although', 'While', 'Though', 'Because' forces the writer to put the subject and main verb far from the beginning of the sentence. This is seldom done well.

- Poor example: 'Because the economy of each country is becoming closer due to globalisation, every country depends on the economy in other countries.'
- Improved: 'Globalisation means that every country depends on the economy of other countries.'

Do not use multiple subordinating clauses

Too many subordinating clauses makes the sentence less clear.

- Poor example: 'Although he had made many movies, and while he was famous through the movie-business, the actor died a lonely, broken man.'
- Stick to one subordinating clause per sentence, until you master clear writing.

Place the subject + main verb close to the start

The reader needs to know what each sentence is about (subject), and what is being done (verb), as soon as possible.

- In the example above, the subject 'the actor' and the verb 'died' are in the third clause of the sentence. This delays the reader's understanding of your message significantly.
- Improved: 'Although he had made many movies, the actor died a lonely, broken man'.
- Better: 'The actor died a lonely, broken man, even though he made many movies'.

Vary your use of subordinating clauses

Varying your writing adds interest for your reader. They will be more engaged if you mix up your clauses, rather than overusing one kind. Use all three kinds of sentences to add variety.

Practise, and read

Your skill level will improve as you increase your awareness of sentence structure, and you also practise it. As you read course material, be aware of the sentence type and level of complexity. If you need to read it twice to understand it, it was probably a complex sentence. Try the exercises on the following page as a starting point.

Exercises

1. Circle the main subject and underline the main verb in these simple sentences.

- The canteen will be open at 9am.
- Don't go changing to try and please me, I want you just the way you are.
- The ladies of the harem of the court of King Caractacus were just passing by.

2. Join these simple sentences with a coordinating conjunction (*and, or but, for, as, so*)

- It is simple. Simple things can be hard.
- The situation is hopeless. We must take the next step.
- The students had a great surprise. The exam was postponed until the following week. Any student that had not submitted their essay would not be permitted to sit the exam.

3. Use subordinating clauses (*because, although, if, until, while, though, after*) to revise these sentences so that those concepts that deserve the most emphasis appear at the end.

There are limited opportunities for teachers to work with individual students in large American colleges and universities.

Several reconstruction evaluation studies are presented in addition to the aforementioned summary discussions for your general information.

4. Rewrite these sentences using a mixture of simple, compound and complex sentences to improve clarity.

The future of those engaged in studies at the postgraduate level, seeking advanced degrees from institutions of higher education, in regard to prospects for desirable employment in teaching positions at best does not have a high degree of certainty.

The major matter that I want to ask about at this point is the degree to which the government policy on asylum seekers can be seen to have the capacity for impacting adversely on the social development of refugee children in a situation in which their basic needs are not being met.

(Adapted from Williams, J.M. (1989), *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, (3rd ed.). Scott, Foresman & Co.)

Other helpsheets available

- Writing in an Academic Style
- Capitalisation