

Chapter 5: Work

Grammar as Rhetoric and Style

Short Simple Sentences and Fragments

Short Simple Sentences

A simple sentence, strictly defined, has a subject and verb: it consists of one independent clause. A simple sentence may have a compound subject, a compound verb, a modifier, and an object or a complement, but it still is one independent clause.

The following examples of simple sentences appear in Barbara Ehrenreich's "Serving in Florida."

There is a problem, though.

But the chances of this are minuscule.

This must be Phillip's theory, anyway.

Finally she tells me not to worry.

What had I been thinking?

Sometimes simple sentences can be rather long:

The e-mails and phone messages addressed to my former self come from a distant race of people with exotic concerns and far too much time on their hands.

This example from Ehrenreich is twenty-eight words. This lesson focuses on *short* simple sentences, ones that run no more than seven words.

Sentence Fragments

A sentence fragment is an incomplete sentence that readers understand to be complete. Some fragments are missing a subject, verb, or both; other fragments have a subject and verb, but are dependent clauses. Consider the underlined fragment in the following example.

“Wouldn’t it be better for the kids if the mother stayed at home?” No offense, but no.

— BUZZ McCLAIN

This fragment has neither a subject nor a verb. If we added a subject and verb to make it a complete sentence, it might read like this:

“Wouldn’t it be better for the kids if the mother stayed at home?” No offense, but no it would not be better.

Following is an example of a fragment created by a freestanding dependent clause:

Hurry, I urge my country. Before it’s too late.

— CLAUDIA O’KEEFE

If we were to rewrite this as a complete sentence, we might connect the dependent clause to the simple sentence (that is, the independent clause) that precedes it:

Hurry, I urge my country, before it’s too late.

Rhetorical and Stylistic Strategy

A series of simple sentences can become monotonous, but one or two short simple sentences can be rhetorically effective in a number of situations:

- after several long sentences
- as a summary of what the writer has just said
- as a transition between sentences or paragraphs

Essentially, one or two short simple sentences create emphasis by contrast. As a writer, when you juxtapose one or two short simple sentences with several longer ones, you call attention to the short simple ones. Consider this paragraph from Claudia O’Keefe’s essay “The Traveling Bra Salesman’s Lesson.”

The question is not whether it is good or bad to import workers or export jobs. The problem is that society has hit an emotional roadblock. My country is one tremendously divided, with pro-business and pro-worker stubbornly pitted against each other. We’re anxious. We’re angry. Neither side wants to give and nothing can be solved until we acknowledge one crucial fact.

Notice that the short simple sentences (both structured simply as subject + linking verb) stand out among the longer sentences in the paragraph. Their similar structure adds even more emphasis.

In some instances, writers choose to use sentence fragments, especially short ones. Although most of the time you will avoid fragments, occasionally you might

use one for effect. What's important is that you use the fragment as you use a short simple sentence, *deliberately*, for a special reason:

- to make a transition
- to signal a conclusion
- to emphasize an important point.

Both the short simple sentence and an effective fragment focus your reader. Consider this example, the conclusion from Claudia O'Keefe's essay:

Hurry, I urge my country. Before it's too late. Only when we admit that the future awaits us can we embrace a more inclusive and thrilling successor to outmoded 20th century ideals, a goal without boundaries or limits, not The American Dream, but The Global Dream.

The underlined fragment could easily have been part of the sentence that precedes it. However, by presenting it as a fragment, O'Keefe slows her reader down and emphasizes the importance of time.

A word of caution! Use both short simple sentences and fragments sparingly. Used intentionally and infrequently, both can be effective. Overused, they lose their punch or become more of a gimmick than a valuable technique. Also, consider whether your audience will interpret a fragment as a grammatical error. If you are confident that your audience will recognize your deliberate use of a fragment, then use it. But if you think your teacher or reader will assume you made a mistake, then it's better to write a complete sentence. Again, if you use fragments infrequently, then your audience is more likely to know you're deliberately choosing what is technically an incomplete sentence.

Exercise 1

EXERCISE 1
Identify the simple sentences in the following paragraph from Annie Dillard's essay "The Writing Life." What is their effect?

The air show announcer hushed. He had been squawking all day, and now he quit. The crowd stilled. Even the children watched dumbstruck as the slow, black biplane buzzed its way around the air. Rahm made beauty with his whole body; it was pure pattern, and you could watch it happen. The plane moved every way a line can move, and it controlled three dimensions, so the line carved massive and subtle slits in the air like sculptures. The plane looped the loop, seeming to arch its back like a gymnast; it stalled, dropped, and spun out of it climbing; it spiraled and knifed west on one side's wings and back east on another; it turned cartwheels, which must be physically impossible; it played with its own line like a cat with yarn. How did the pilot know where in the air he was? If he got lost, the ground would swat him.

Exercise 2

• EXERCISE 2

Revise the paragraph in Exercise 1 either by turning it into a series of short simple sentences or by eliminating the simple sentences entirely. How do your revisions change the effect? Read the original paragraph; then read your revised paragraph aloud, and listen to the difference.

Exercise 3

• EXERCISE 3

Identify the short simple sentences and the fragment in the following paragraphs reproduced here from Tillie Olsen's short story "I Stand Here Ironing." Discuss their effect. In your analysis, keep in mind that fiction writers use these syntactical strategies for the same reasons as nonfiction writers, yet they also employ short sentences and fragments to evoke disconnected thoughts of the narrator.

Why do I put that first? I do not even know if it matters, or if it explains anything.

She was a beautiful baby. She blew shining bubbles of sound. She loved motion, loved light, loved color and music and textures. She would lie on the floor in her blue overalls patting the surface so hard in ecstasy her hands and feet would blur. She was a miracle to me, but when she was eight months old I had to leave her daytimes with the woman downstairs to whom she was no miracle at all, for I worked or looked for work and for Emily's father, who "could no longer endure" (he wrote in his good-bye note) "sharing want with us."

I was nineteen. It was the pre-relief, pre-WPA world of the depression. I would start running as soon as I got off the streetcar, running up the stairs, the place smelling sour, and awake or asleep to startle awake, when she saw me she would break into a clogged weeping that could not be comforted, a weeping I can hear yet.

After a while I found a job hashing at night so I could be with her days, and it was better. But it came to where I had to bring her to his family and leave her.

It took a long time to raise the money for her fare back. Then she got chicken pox and I had to wait longer. When she finally came, I hardly knew her, walking quick and nervous like her father, looking like her father, thin, and dressed in a shoddy red that yellowed her skin and glared at the pockmarks. All the baby loveliness gone.

Exercise 4

• EXERCISE 4

Find examples of short simple sentences or fragments that are used effectively in this textbook or that you find in magazines, newspapers, or novels: