

The Sentence Fragment

A sentence expresses a complete thought. When something that is only part of a sentence is written with a capital letter at the beginning and a period or question mark or exclamation point at the end, the result is a *sentence fragment*, a part of a sentence posing as a whole sentence.

****A fragment is a separated part of a sentence that does not express a complete thought.**

In each of the following examples, a part of a sentence has been punctuated as though it were a whole sentence. These sentence fragments are underlined. If you read only the fragments aloud, you will notice that they sound incomplete.

EXAMPLES Women in the civil rights movement are well known. Including Mary McLeod Bethune and Mary Church Terrell.

With great concentration and much discipline. Hank Aaron hit his record-breaking home run.

Antonia Brico gained fame. When she conducted the first all-female orchestra in the 1930's.

The Rothmans driving to the country.

Detecting Fragments

If your ear leads you to suspect that you have written a sentence fragment, there are two tests that you can use to be certain. First, look for a subject and a verb. If you do not find both, you have a fragment.

FRAGMENTS Including Mary McLeod Bethune and Mary Church Terrell.
With great concentration and much discipline.
The Rothmans driving to the country.

Neither of the first two examples has a subject or a verb. (The word *including* is not a verb; it can be part of a verb phrase such as *are including*, but it is never a verb by itself.) The third example has a subject but not a verb. (The word *driving*, like the word *including*, needs a helping verb to form a verb phrase, such as *were driving*.)

Looking for the subject and verb will help you spot many fragments, but not all of them. Some fragments have both a subject and a verb.

FRAGMENT When she conducted the first all-female orchestra in the 1930's. [*She* is the subject; *conducted* is the verb.]

If the suspected fragment has both a subject and a verb, a second test can be applied. Ask yourself whether the group of words expresses a complete thought. Separated from the rest of the sentence of which it is a part, the fragment above does not make sense. The reader wonders what happened “when she conducted the first all-female orchestra in the 1930’s.”

Exercise 1: Identifying Sentences and Fragments

Read the following groups of words, preferably aloud. If the group of words is a sentence, write **S** after the group of words. If the group of words is a fragment, write **F**.

1. In the center of the circus.
2. When the clown came on.
3. The ringmaster was smartly dressed.
4. On a wire stretched high above our heads.
5. Because no nets were used.
6. Sensing the dangerousness of the act, the crowd fell silent.
7. The dogs were dressed in evening clothes.
8. Since the elephant was well trained.
9. The graceful trapeze artists.
10. Riding bareback was a beautiful girl.

Exercise #2: Identifying Sentences and Fragments

Some of the following items consist of two sentences. Others contain a fragment. Write **S** for items containing only sentences and **F** for items containing a fragment.

1. Betsy can't have the meeting at her house. Because her little brother has the measles.
2. Electricity is everywhere around us. It is in the air and in the ground.
3. We cleaned the three little fish. Hoping that nobody would ask to see our catch.
4. Thoreau spent more than two years at Walden Pond. Living in a one-room shed.
5. I promised to go to the movies with Bryan. Who would never forgive me if I went swimming instead.
6. About 245,000 students belong to Junior Achievement. Founded in 1919, it is a national organization that helps to develop leadership.
7. Leighann never gossips. If she can't think of something nice to say about another girl, she doesn't say anything.
8. Maria Martinez, a Pueblo Indian from New Mexico, gained fame for her pottery. Based on ancient methods.
9. If I can't go, I'll call you at six. Otherwise, go without me.
10. “A stitch in time saves nine” is an old proverb. Which can be applied to many daily situations.