Although they come in a variety of lengths and forms, sentences tend to be made of just a few basic features. Understanding these features will help you when writing is difficult.

The basic parts of every sentence are subjects, predicates, objects, and clauses. They can appear in many different forms and places.

5.1 Subjects and Predicates

The subject of a sentence is the main actor of the sentence: the person, animal, or thing performing the verb.

The predicate of a sentence is what is being done. It's the verb and everything connected to the verb, including whatever the verb is acting on. A predicate always keeps company with a subject, and it has a voice (see section 6.6) and a tense (see section 6.4). In English, we usually put the subject before the predicate. Consider the following simple sentence:

- Miguel sells cars.

Here Miguel is the subject and sells cars is the predicate. When a sentence has both a subject and predicate, it is considered complete, as opposed to being a sentence fragment. In writing, most ordinary sentences are complete. However, sentence fragments are far more common when speaking. Where beginning writers often go astray is trying to transcribe fragments of spoken language exactly as they hear them.

5.2 Subject-Verb Agreement

The subject and verb in a sentence must agree in number. That is, if the subject is plural, the verb must be conjugated in the proper plural form. If the subject is singular, then the verb must be conjugated in the proper singular form. (See more at section 6.0, Verbs.)

- Crows are loud birds.
- The little girl waves to the bus driver.

However, for either/or and neither/nor sentences, the verb is conjugated based on the subject nearest to it.

- Either our dad or our grandparents are picking us up.
- Neither our grandparents nor our dad is picking us up.

A phrase or clause that comes between the subject and the verb does not change the antecedent's number.

- Mexican food, no matter what you think of hot peppers, is its own reward.

Compound subjects are matched with a plural referent.

- An ambulance and a fire truck are on their way to the scene of the accident.

When you use indefinite pronouns such as anybody, each, everybody, and someone, use a singular verb.

- Each of the voters takes a ballot.
- Someone was speaking out of turn.
5.3 Objects

Objects are what is acted upon or affected by the verb. There are three kinds of objects found in sentences: direct objects, indirect objects, and objects of a preposition.

A direct object is acted upon by the verb.
- Miguel sells cars.

Cars is the object, because it is what is being sold.

An indirect object receives or is acted upon by the direct object. We can revise our sentence to include an indirect object:
- Miguel sells businesses cars.

In this version of our sentence, cars is still the direct object, but it now has an indirect object, businesses.

The object of a preposition (see section 13.0, Prepositions) could be said to direct the action of the verb and tell us how the verb was performed. The object comes after the preposition. For example:
- Ali pushed the bicycle onto the sidewalk.

In this sentence, the sidewalk is the object of the preposition onto, and it tells us how pushed happened.

5.4 Clauses

If you have a phrase or sentence with a subject and a predicate, then you have a clause. The clause can be sophisticated or simple, but it's still a clause.

An independent clause can function on its own and looks much like a regular sentence.
- I left my backpack on the bus.

A dependent clause cannot function on its own because it leaves an idea or thought unfinished.
- When I left my backpack on the bus.

That's a dependent clause because the word when leaves us wondering. It's perfectly fine to have a dependent clause, but it should always keep company with other clauses that complete them, like this:
- When I left my backpack on the bus, the driver gave it back the next day.

Note that the driver gave it back the next day is not a dependent clause because, except for capitalizing “The,” it could exist on its own as a sentence.

5.5 Subordinators

The when in when I left my backpack on the bus is an example of a subordinator, which introduces a dependent clause.
Subordinators do the work of connecting the dependent clause to another clause to complete the sentence. In each of these examples, the first word is a subordinator:

- because her old hat had lost its shape
- that was in the cupboard behind the cans
- which he bought as soon as it was on the market

Subordinators can include relative pronouns (see section 10.6), subordinating conjunctions (see section 14.3), and noun clause markers.

**Noun clause markers** are useful when you want to connect two independent clauses. They include:

- how
- however
- if
- that
- what
- whenever
- where
- wherever
- whether
- which
- whichever
- who
- whoever
- whom
- whomever
- whose
- why

- Willa learned. + The horses are tame enough to ride. = Willa learned that the horses are tame enough to ride.
- I can’t understand. + What is he saying? = I can’t understand what he is saying.

- Sunil wonders. + Can the Mets win the World Series? = Sunil wonders whether the Mets can win the World Series.

_That_ is a special noun clause marker that can be omitted. The others cannot. For example:

- Willa learned that the horses are tame enough to ride. = Willa learned the horses are tame enough to ride.

In fact, many copyeditors and professors will insist that you remove _that_ like that as being unnecessary.

### 5.6 Phrases

While a clause has both a subject and a predicate, a **phrase** does not. A phrase can simply be a cohesive set of words that makes some sense. Phrases are usually parts of clauses, and they can function as a part of speech, such as a _verb phrase_ (see section 5.6.2), _noun phrase_ (see section 5.6.1), or _prepositional phrase_ (see section 5.6.3).

**Phrase**

- yogurt in the smoothie
- broken window
- because of the high cost
- after the concert

**Clause**

- I put yogurt in the smoothie.
- A broken window lets the cold in.
- because it costs a lot
- after the concert ends