Sentences: Simple, Compound, and Complex Notes

A common weakness in writing is the lack of varied sentences. The most effective writing uses a variety of the sentence types explained below. Becoming aware of the four general types of sentences--simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex--can help you vary the sentences in your writing.

**Simple Sentences**

A simple sentence contains three basic elements that make it a sentence:

- a **subject** (who or what the sentence is about)
- a **main verb** (related to the subject)
- a **complete thought**
  - the complete thought can include a direction object if the verb is an action verb that shows the subject doing something that would affect another noun in the sentence—other than the subject.
    - She sang. (complete thought with no direct object)
    - He hit the ball. (complete thought with a direct object)

**Fragment**: If a sentence does not have a subject, a main verb, and a complete thought then it is not a sentence but a fragment, which is not acceptable in formal writing.

**Run-on Sentence**: When a sentence has two or more independent clauses (i.e., complete sentences) that are joined without appropriate punctuation or conjunction. This is **not** an acceptable sentence.

Examples of simple sentences include the following:

1. Joe waited for the train.
   
   "Joe" = subject, "waited" = verb

2. The train was late.
   
   "The train" = subject, "was" = verb

3. Mary and Samantha took the bus.
   
   "Mary and Samantha" = compound subject, "took" = verb

4. I looked for Mary and Samantha at the bus station.
   
   "I" = subject, "looked" = verb

5. Mary and Samantha arrived at the bus station early but waited until noon for the bus.
   
   "Mary and Samantha" = compound subject, "arrived" and "waited" = compound verb

If you use many simple sentences in an essay, you should consider revising some of the sentences into compound or complex sentences (explained below).

The use of compound subjects, compound verbs, prepositional phrases (such as "at the bus station"), and other elements help lengthen simple sentences, but simple sentences often are short. The use of too many simple sentences can make writing "choppy" and can prevent the writing from flowing smoothly.

A simple sentence can also be referred to as an **independent clause**. It is referred to as "independent" because, while it might be part of a compound or complex sentence, it can also stand by itself as a complete sentence.
Compound Sentences

A compound sentence refers to a sentence made up of two independent clauses (simple sentences) connected to one another with a coordinating conjunction. Coordinating conjunctions are easy to remember if you think of the words "FAN BOYS":

- For
- And
- Nor
- But
- Or
- Yet
- So

Examples of compound sentences include the following:

1. Joe waited for the train, but the train was late.
2. I looked for Mary and Samantha at the bus station, but they arrived at the station before noon and left on the bus before I arrived.
3. Mary and Samantha arrived at the bus station before noon, and they left on the bus before I arrived.
4. Mary and Samantha left on the bus before I arrived, so I did not see them at the bus station.

Punctuation: A semicolon (;), used as a coordinating conjunction, shows a strong positive or negative relationship between independent clauses.

If you rely heavily on compound sentences in an essay, you should consider revising some of them into complex sentences (explained below).

Coordinating conjunctions are useful for connecting sentences, but compound sentences are often overused. While coordinating conjunctions can indicate some type of relationship between the two independent clauses in the sentence, they sometimes do not indicate much of a relationship. The word "and," for example, only adds one independent clause to another, without indicating how the two parts of a sentence are logically related. Too many compound sentences that use "and" can weaken writing.

Clearer and more specific relationships can be established through the use of complex sentences.
A complex sentence is made up of an independent clause and one or more dependent clauses connected to it. A dependent clause is similar to an independent clause, or complete sentence, but it lacks one of the elements that would make it a complete sentence.

Examples of dependent clauses include the following:

- because Mary and Samantha arrived at the bus station before noon
- while he waited at the train station
- after they left on the bus

Dependent clauses such as those above cannot stand alone as a sentence, but they can be added to an independent clause to form a complex sentence.

Dependent clauses begin with subordinating conjunctions. Below are some of the most common subordinating conjunctions:

- after
- although
- as
- because
- before
- even though
- if
- since
- though
- unless
- until
- when
- whenever
- whereas
- wherever
- while
- whenever
- whereas
- wherever
- while

A complex sentence joins an independent clause with one or more dependent clauses.

The dependent clauses can go first in the sentence followed by the independent clause:

Punctuation: When the dependent clause begins the sentence, a comma should be used to separate the two clauses.

1. Because Mary and Samantha arrived at the bus station before noon, I did not see them at the station.
2. While he waited at the train station, Joe realized that the train was late.
3. After they left on the bus, Mary and Samantha realized that Joe was waiting at the train station.

The independent clauses can go first in the sentence followed by the dependent clause:

Punctuation: When the dependent clause ends the sentence, a comma should not be used to separate the two clauses. Two exceptions to this are clauses that begin with “who” or “which.”

1. I did not see them at the station because Mary and Samantha arrived at the bus station before noon.
2. Joe realized that the train was late while he waited at the train station.
3. Mary and Samantha realized that Joe was waiting at the train station after they left on the bus.

The independent clause can be broken up with a dependent clause in the middle of it:

Punctuation: When a dependent clause is in the middle of an independent clause, commas should separate it from the independent clause.

1. Joe, tired from the journey, fell asleep on the train.
2. Mary and Samantha, who were looking for Joe, arrived at the train station before noon.
3. Mary and Samantha, realizing Joe was waiting at the bus station, stopped the bus driver and got off.

Complex sentences are often more effective than compound sentences because a complex sentence indicates clearer and more specific relationships between the main parts of the sentence. The word "before," for instance, tells readers that one thing occurs before another. A word such as "although" conveys a more complex relationship than a word such as "and" conveys.
**Complex-Compound Sentences**

A **Complex-compound sentence** is made up of a **compound sentence** and one or more **dependent clauses** connected to it.

**Punctuation**: Use commas in the same way you would in compound and complex sentence.

1. Because Mary and Samantha arrived at the bus station before noon, I looked for them at the station, but we did not see one another.
2. While Joe waited at the train station, he was reading his paper, so he never realized when the train departed.
3. Mary and Samantha realized that Joe was waiting at the train station, and they could do nothing about it after they left on the bus.

Compound-complex sentences are able to squeeze information from three or more sentences into one, making them very effective sentences.

**Beginning Sentences with "And" or "Because"**

**Should you begin a sentence with "and" or "but" (or one of the other coordinating conjunctions)?**

The short answer is "no." You should avoid beginning a sentence with "and," "or," "but," or the other coordinating conjunctions. These words generally are used to join together parts of a sentence, not to begin a new sentence.

However, such sentences can be used effectively. Because sentences beginning with these words stand out, they are sometimes used for emphasis. If you use sentences beginning with one of the coordinating conjunctions, you should use these sentences sparingly and carefully.

**Should you begin a sentence with "because"?**

There is nothing wrong with beginning a sentence with "because."

Perhaps some students are told not to begin a sentence with "because" to avoid sentence fragments (something like "Because Mary and Samantha arrived at the bus station before noon" is a sentence fragment), but it is perfectly acceptable to begin a sentence with "because" as long as the sentence is complete (as in "Because Mary and Samantha arrived at the bus station before noon, I did not see them at the station.")

**Steps for Identifying the Types of Sentence**

1. **Is there a coordinating conjunction** (FANBOYS) in the sentence?
   - If there is, is there an independent clause (subject/main verb/complete thought) on the right side and on the left side of it?
     - If there is, then it is a **compound sentence** and a comma needs to be places before the coordinating conjunction.
     - If it is not, then the sentence is either a **simple or a complex sentence**, and you will need to go on to the next step.
2. If there is no coordinating conjunction then identify the **independent clause** (subject/main verb/complete thought).
   - If there is **no dependent** clause before, after, or in the middle of the independent clause then the sentence is a **simple sentence**.
   - If there is a **dependent** clause before, after, or in the middle of the independent clause then the sentence is a **complex sentence**.
3. If you are able to identify a compound sentence and then realizes there are one or more dependent clauses attached to it (before, after, or in the middle), then the sentence is a **complex-compound sentence**.