Understanding Sentence Elements

The ability to compose effective sentences does not depend on an ability to describe sentences grammatically or linguistically. Rather, most proficient writers use intuitive language skills, developed over a number of years, when they compose sentences. Yet when writers understand sentence elements and structure, they are better able to revise sentences to achieve a clear form and purpose. To help you in effective sentence revision, the following sections offer a brief overview of basic sentence elements.

1 RECOGNIZE THE BASIC ELEMENTS OF SENTENCES

Although many sentences are complicated word structures, all sentences, even the most complicated, are built from a few basic elements: subjects (S), verbs (V), objects (O), and complements (C). These elements work together to express a central idea that may be further developed or refined by other elements: modifiers (M) and conjunctions (Conj).

The verb with its objects, complements, and modifiers is known as the predicate of the sentence. The predicate describes the action performed by the subject or the state of being of the subject. Subject and predicate are the two main parts of a simple sentence.

- The lawyer wrote. [Subject + Verb.]
- The lawyer wrote the brief. [Subject + Verb + Object.]
- The trial lawyer hurriedly wrote the Hernandez brief but then carefully revised it. [Subject + Verb + Object + Conjunction + Verb + Object. Modifiers used throughout.]

These examples show that a sentence composed of the basic elements can be made more specific and informative through expansion.
1a Subjects identify the people, places, things, ideas, qualities, or conditions that act, are acted upon, or are described in a sentence.

Nouns and pronouns are the most common subjects, but phrases (groups of words without verbs) or clauses (groups of words with subjects and verbs) may also be subjects.

\[ S \rightarrow V \text{ (Subject (phrase) + Verb + Complement.} \]

To win is her objective. [Subject (phrase) + Verb + Complement.]

\[ S \rightarrow V \text{ (Subject (clause) + Verb + Complement.} \]

What President Aquino wants most is political stability. [Subject (clause) + Verb + Complement.]

1b Verbs express action (select, walk) or a state of being (seem, is). Verbs consist of single words (develop) or groups of words (might have developed).

A verb that requires an object to complete its meaning is a transitive verb. A verb that does not require an object to complete its meaning is an intransitive verb. Notice that some verbs can be either transitive or intransitive.

\[ S \rightarrow \text{TRANS } V \rightarrow O \text{ (President Roosevelt ordered the evacuation.} \]

After two years, Senator Harris resigned.

\[ S \rightarrow \text{TRANS } V \rightarrow O \text{ (The building inspector examined the wiring.} \]

Pandas eat voraciously.

A verb connecting a complement to a subject is a linking verb.

\[ S \rightarrow V \text{ (The child seemed frightened.} \]

After years of study, Fred became an aerospace engineer.

1c Objects are nouns or pronouns that complete the ideas expressed by subjects and transitive verbs.

Direct objects answer the questions what? or whom? Indirect objects answer the questions to whom or what? or for whom or what?

With great care, Dr. Rodriguez completed the report.

[Report is what Dr. Rodriguez completed.]

Dr. Rodriguez sent the immunologist the report.

[Report is what Dr. Rodriguez sent; immunologist is to whom he sent it.]
Complements are adjectives or nouns that complete the ideas in a sentence by modifying the subject (predicate adjective) or by renaming the subject (predicate noun).

Complements are joined to the subjects of sentences by linking verbs, such as am, are, is, was, were, become, get, feel, look, and seem.

Throughout the competition, Warren remained optimistic. [Predicate adjective modifies the subject Warren.]

In the end, Warren was first runner-up. [Predicate noun renames the subject Warren.]

Modifiers (typically adjectives, adverbs, and prepositional phrases used as adjectives or adverbs) describe or limit subjects, verbs, objects, complements, or other modifiers.

Modifiers alter the meanings of other words by answering one of these questions: what kind? which one? how many? whose? how? when? where? how often? or to what extent?

Long speeches are unacceptable. [What kind of speeches?] Those four-wheelers are dangerous. [Which four-wheelers?] We received sixty-seven applications. [How many applications?] The subcommittee shared its findings. [Whose findings?] The immigrant slowly completed the form. [How did he complete it?] After the tennis match, we celebrated. [When did we celebrate?] Leave the carton in the mailroom. [Where should it be left?] Michael called his doctor frequently. [How often did he call?] The glassblower very skillfully formed the stem. [What degree of skill did the glassblower use?]

Conjunctions join and relate two or more words, phrases, or clauses in a sentence.

Coordinating conjunctions (and, but, for, nor, or, so, and yet) link equivalent sentence elements.
John Kander and Fred Ebb collaborated on several major musicals. [Conjunction links two subjects.]
The burglars gained access to the vault yet left its contents intact. [Conjunction links two verbs.]
He fought unenthusiastically but skillfully. [Conjunction links two modifiers.]
I will not do it, nor will I recommend anyone else who might. [Conjunction links two clauses.]

**Correlative conjunctions**, such as both . . . and, either . . . or, neither . . . nor, and not only . . . but also, work in pairs and also link equivalent sentence elements.

Both Senator Robins and Representative Hershell received contributions from the tobacco industry. [Conjunction links two subjects.]
Marion will go either to Butler University to study pharmacology or to Indiana University to study dentistry. [Conjunction links two modifiers.]

**Subordinating conjunctions**, such as after, although, because, even if, so that, until, and when, join clauses, but they subordinate one clause to another. The subordinate clause, introduced by the subordinating conjunction, can be positioned at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of a sentence.

Because she was outspoken on the subject of women writers, Virginia Woolf has become a central figure in feminist criticism. [Subordinate clause first.]
Virginia Woolf has become a central figure in feminist criticism because she was outspoken on the subject of women writers. [Subordinate clause last.]
Virginia Woolf, because she was outspoken on the subject of women writers, has become a central figure in feminist criticism. [Subordinate clause embedded.]

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**Exercise**

Identify each of the underlined words or phrases as a subject (S), verb (V), object (O), complement (C), modifier (M), or conjunction (Conj). (Consider proper names as single elements, but consider all other words separately.)

1. Although the 1981 baseball strike lasted seven weeks, the 1985 baseball strike lasted only three days.
2. Cadets at West Point are considered members of the regular Army.
3. Jason sent me an application for Duke University, in hopes that I too would apply for admission.
4. In 1967, a fire aboard Apollo 1 killed Virgil Grissom, Edward White, and Roger Chaffee.

5. General Washington commissioned seven ships to fight against the British Navy.

6. Universal Studios and 20th Century Fox produced the five motion pictures with the highest revenues in one summer.

7. The Iliad and the Odyssey, composed by the Greek poet Homer, are mainstays of most humanities curricula.

8. Thomas à Becket was the archbishop of Canterbury during the reign of Henry II.

9. In spite of recent declines in sales, General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler are still among the fifteen largest corporations in the United States.

10. U. S. Grant was an effective general but an ineffectual president.

2 RECOGNIZE BASIC SENTENCE PATTERNS

There are four basic sentence patterns: simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex.

2a A simple sentence contains one independent clause, that is, a subject and verb that can stand alone as a grammatically complete sentence.

The subject and verb of a simple sentence may appear in compound form. A simple sentence need not be simplistic, but it does present a single idea. In fact, simple sentences, because they present ideas clearly, are useful for creating emphasis.

Hurricanes are frightening.

Hurricanes and other tropical storms are both frightening and dangerous. [Though more complicated than the preceding example, this is a simple sentence because it has one (compound) subject and one predicate; the sentence also includes one compound complement.]
2b  
A compound sentence contains two or more independent clauses joined by a comma and a coordinating conjunction (and, but, for, nor, or, so, and yet) or by a semicolon alone.

A compound sentence presents a balanced relationship between the clauses that are joined, thus emphasizing that the ideas in the sentence are of equal importance.

We moved to the Gulf coast to escape the cold Ohio winters, but then we were terrified by tropical storms. [Two independent clauses joined by a conjunction.]

We moved to Florida in 1978; we stayed only five years, however, and then returned to Ohio. [Two independent clauses joined by a semicolon.]

2c  
A complex sentence contains at least two clauses: one independent and one or more subordinate clauses.

Subordinating conjunctions, such as although, because, since, when, and while, and relative pronouns, such as that, what, which, and who, join the clauses in a complex sentence. One clause, and thus the interrelationship of the ideas in the sentence, is emphasized over the others.

Although it rains in the midmornings, the afternoons are generally sunny. [Subordinate clause, then independent clause.]

We enjoyed our stay in Florida, even though we knew that we could not remain. [Independent clause, then subordinate clauses.]

2d  
A compound-complex sentence contains three or more clauses—at least two independent clauses and one subordinate clause.

A compound-complex sentence establishes a complicated relationship among a series of ideas.

While we lived in Florida, we survived four minor hurricanes without injuries or property damage, but we never developed the nonchalance of native Floridians. [Subordinate clause, then independent clause, then another independent clause.]

Exercise

Identify the following sentences as simple, compound, complex, or compound-complex.
1. Lightning is a discharge of electricity between two clouds or between a cloud and the earth.

2. Because of deaths during the war with the Soviet Union and because of massive emigration to Iran and Pakistan, Afghanistan’s population has shrunk by one-third in the last decade.

3. According to some statistics, Northern Ireland has the highest unemployment rate in Europe.

4. The original purpose of the Crusades was to take Christianity to the non-Christian “infidels,” but the holy wars also served to enrich trade and the arts in Europe.

5. Although the 1986 Tax Reform Act is supposed to be revenue neutral, it provides too many loopholes for selected businesses.

6. Mongolia is located in eastern Asia, between Siberia and China, and is slightly larger than Alaska.

7. After his notorious raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859, John Brown was captured and hanged; in the years that followed, his name became a symbol of ineffectual militant protest.

8. Although *bona fide* means “in good faith” in Latin, it is commonly used today to mean “genuine.”

9. Because the costs of American materials and labor are high, sales of American-made shoes have plummeted, and sales of imports from Brazil and South Korea have risen.

10. Most Americans assume that the U.S. Navy is our oldest maritime service, yet the U.S. Coast Guard was established in 1790, eight years before the Navy.
3 EXPAND AND VARY SENTENCE PATTERNS

As writers move from drafting sentences to revising them, they make decisions about diction, about the placement of phrases and clauses, and about the structural patterns of sentences. The larger issue—sentence patterns—is important because sentence construction (and reconstruction) often determines how effectively writing communicates with readers.

3a Use Coordination

When isolated, successive sentences present ideas that together establish an important, parallel relationship; those sentences can be effectively combined by coordination. Coordination is the joining of simple sentences to form compound sentences, and it is also the meshing or combining of related sentence elements through pairing or seriation.

President Reagan initially denied that the United States had traded arms for hostages. The Tower commission subsequently revealed otherwise. [Two sentences effectively joined by a coordinating conjunction.]

Oliver North's activities were largely unsupervised. John Poindexter's activities were also unsupervised. [Combining the sentences—by using a compound subject—improves the emphasis.]

3b Use Subordination

When isolated, successive sentences present related ideas; the sentences can be combined through subordination. Subordination is the joining of simple sentences to form complex or compound-complex sentences, but it is also the embedding of words, phrases, or clauses in the structure of the most important sentence.

Marc Chagall was a native of Russia. He emigrated to France. While in France he produced vibrant and dreamlike paintings. [Three independent clauses compressed into one complex sentence.]

Chagall's images are often childlike. Undiscerning observers sometimes find his work simplistic. Observant critics see an ingenious use of childhood perception in his work.
[Three independent clauses reworked into a compound-complex sentence that reveals a cause-and-effect relationship among the ideas.]

Subordination is a useful means of indicating emphasis and bringing variety to sentences. Consider subordination the groundwork of a mature and effective sentence style and work to use it to achieve your purpose.

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**Exercise**

Use coordination and subordination to combine the following pairs of sentences.

1. Four men from the United States have won the Olympic figure-skating title. Only one, Dick Button, won the title twice.

2. *Amadeus* popularized the works of Mozart. The plot of the play and film is historically inaccurate.

3. Ten percent of home-study lawyers pass the California Bar Exam. Sixty percent of law school–trained lawyers pass.

4. Alfred Smith was the first Catholic to run for president. He lost by a wide margin to Herbert Hoover in 1928.

5. Trademarks are usually specialized symbols, products, or company names. They can also be individual words and letters.

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**Exercise**

The following paragraph contains simple sentences only. Use coordination and subordination to combine sentences and produce an effective and varied paragraph.

The Beatles were the most successful pop group of all time. They began playing in Liverpool, England. The group had four members. They were John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr. Their early music was characterized by a simple rhythm-and-blues style. It also had simple harmonies and lyrics. The Beatles’ early hits included “She Loves You,” “Please Please Me,” and “I Want to Hold Your Hand.” These simple songs attracted
worldwide interest. John Lennon and Paul McCartney later wrote complicated songs. The lyrics became imaginative and philosophical. The music itself became varied. It was also complex. They experimented with new instruments and recording equipment. Their later work included the albums *Rubber Soul*, *The White Album*, and *Abbey Road*. The Beatles’ most sophisticated work was the album *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*. It contained some of the group’s most memorable songs. Each member of the band developed separate interests. The group disbanded in 1970.

*Understanding Sentence Elements: Review Exercises*

In the following paragraph, label each of the underlined elements as a subject (S), verb (V), object (O), complement (C), modifier (M), or conjunction (Conj.).

Our Sun is a sphere of superheated gas. Hydrogen atoms at its core fuse, creating the atomic reactions that produce both light and energy. Scientists estimate that the temperature of the Sun’s core is twenty million degrees centigrade, while the surface temperature is approximately six thousand degrees centigrade. The diameter of the Sun is roughly 850,000 miles. These figures suggest that our Sun is neither a hot nor a large star when compared with others in our solar system.

The following paragraph contains simple sentences only. Use coordination and subordination to combine sentences to make this paragraph effective. Then label sentences by type: simple (S), compound (C), complex (CX), and compound-complex (CCX).

The Black Death devastated Europe between 1348 and 1666. The disease was brought to Europe through Italy. Traders carried it from the Black Sea area. The epidemic of 1348 killed one-fourth of the population of Europe. The disease was carried by fleas. This was unknown in the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. The fleas lived on rats. The disease raged, subsided, and reemerged for three hundred years. The worst epidemic in England occurred
in 1665. Entire towns and villages were wiped out. London’s population
decreased by one-tenth. The population was approximately 450,000. People
were terrified. They tried all kinds of cures. They didn’t understand the nature
of the disease. The cures failed. Samuel Pepys wrote about the Black Death in
his Diary. Daniel Defoe wrote a fictional account titled Journal of the Plague Year.