

## *Getting a Sense of the Sentence*

The purpose of this handout is to give you a brief overview of what a correct sentence is and how to write different types of correct sentences.

### *Definition of a Correct Sentence*

A correct sentence is a group of words that contain a subject, a verb, and make a complete thought. All sentences begin with a capital letter and end with a period (.), a question mark (?), or an exclamation mark (!). A sentence can be short, medium length, or long and still be correct. Here are some examples of correct sentences:

Our football team won almost every one of its games this season. (Making a statement)

Who was America's first president? (Asking a question)

*Lord of the Rings* is the best sci fi movie ever! (Making a highly emotional statement)

Here's some more information about the subject, the verb, and the complete thought:

### *Subject*

The subject of the sentence will be either a noun or a pronoun.

It will usually be near the front of the sentence (often the first or second word).

The subject is the word that the sentence is giving information about.

The subject is the word that is doing the action of the verb.

### *Verb*

- The verb is the most important word in the sentence, because without a verb, there is no sentence. The verb makes the sentence make sense.
- The verb is either an action word (*jump, drive, walk, run, play, swim*, etc.) or a word that shows being or existence (*is, am, was, were, will be, has been*, etc.).
- The verb will usually be immediately after the subject of the sentence.

### *Complete Thought*

This is the most important element of a sentence. It means that all the words in the sentence, when considered together, make a whole idea (as opposed to only part of an idea). If it's a whole idea, then you should get a complete picture in your head of what the sentence is saying. Here are some examples:

*Not a whole idea:* The chair in the parlor. (Well, what about the chair in the parlor?)

*Whole idea:* The chair in the parlor was covered in brown leather. (OK! Now I get the whole picture!)

## *Different Types of Correct Sentences*

There are many different ways to write a sentence and still make it a correct sentence. Here are just some of them:

1. **Compound sentence.** This is when two correct sentences are joined together into one sentence with the word *and*, *but*, or *or* in the middle between the two sentences.

Joe sang “America the Beautiful,” and Mary accompanied him on the piano.

2. **Inverted word order.** This just means that the sentence starts with some word other than the subject.

Coming down the road was the most enormous truck that Bobby had ever seen.  
(The subject of the sentence is *truck*, not *road*.)

In the top dresser drawer were all of my clean, white socks.  
(The subject of the sentence is *socks*, not *drawer*.)

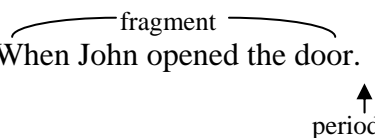
3. Start with a dependent clause beginning with *When.....*, *If.....*, *Since.....*, *Although.....*, *Unless.....*, or a similar word.

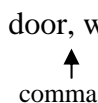
When the departure of Flight 368 was announced, the young man and young woman looked sadly at each other.

If I had a dime for every time I told someone that I was sorry, I’d be rich.

Since I was driving my dad’s new Mercedes, I was trying to be very careful with it.

Note: In these kinds of sentences, be sure to put a comma after the dependent clause, never a period. If you put a period there, you will create a fragment sentence, which is a serious error.

Wrong:  When John opened the door. We all noticed that he looked very tired.

Correct:  When John opened the door, we all noticed that he looked very tired.

4. There is a special kind of sentence called an imperative sentence because it sounds like you are ordering someone to do something. In this kind of sentence, the subject is understood to be the word you, although the word *you* is never actually used within the sentence itself. Here are some examples:

Be sure to study well for your algebra exam tomorrow morning.  
(*You* be sure to study....)

Do Exercises 3 and 4 for your homework tonight.  
(*You* do Exercises....)

“Stop making that annoying noise!”  
(*You* stop making....)

5. Sometimes you may begin a sentence with a prepositional phrase instead of beginning with the subject of the sentence.

At exactly midnight, we began our little secret Halloween adventure.  
(Beginning with this phrase emphasizes the time element of the event.)

Around the corner, we saw a police car.  
(This emphasizes where the police car was.)

For saving the lives of every man in his unit, Sgt. Forsythe was given the Congressional Medal of Honor.  
(This emphasizes the reason for giving the medal.)

Sentences are wonderful ways to express our ideas. Learn the many different types of sentences and the ways to write them, and fill your essay with a nice variety of sentences. If done correctly, they can be powerful, effective, and even fun to write.

## Various Kinds of Correct Sentences

A sentence can be written in many different ways and styles and still be very correct. Here are some examples and models of various kinds of correct sentences.

1. The basic pattern of a simple correct English sentence is:

Subject + verb + complete thought

Example: Mary visited her sister in Cleveland last week.  
(subj) (verb) (the rest of the complete thought)

2. Sometimes a correct sentence can start with a word other than the subject.

Example: Last week Mary visited her sister in Cleveland.  
(subj) (verb)

3. Sometimes one sentence will actually be made up of two short or “baby” sentences joined together by the word and or but or or.

Example: Mary visited her sister in Cleveland, and she had a very good time.  
(subj) (verb) (subj)(verb)

4. You might want to start out a sentence with a clause telling where or when something happened.

Example: When Joe arrived at the party, he began playing the piano.

In the back yard of our large home, the autumn leaves have really been falling quickly.

5. You could start a sentence with an -ing form of a verb.

Example: Walking slowly and stiffly into the room, Fred said that he had exercised too much last night.

Caution! If you begin a sentence with an -ing form of a verb, be sure that the first noun or pronoun in the main part of the sentence is whoever is doing the -ing verb.

Example:

Wrong: Looking high up into the sky, the tall building seemed very big to the little girl.

Right: Looking high up into the sky, the little girl saw the big building.

## *Practice in Writing Different Styles of Sentences*

Write one sentence similar to the example in each style listed below.

1. A very short sentence.

For example: The wind blew gently.

s. v. c.t.

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(subject) (verb) (completion of thought)

2. A medium-length sentence.

For example: Mary always helps her mother make chocolate cake.

3. A long sentence.

For example: Bob rode his new bike all the way down to DeKalb to visit his good friend Joe, with whom he had graduated from high school.

4. A sentence where the first word is not the subject.

For example: At night many small insects come out to look for food.

5. A compound sentence (two sentences joined by and, but, or or).

For example: Bill's cousin played the drums, and Terry followed along on the piano.

s. v. c.t. s. v. c.t.

(Write one sentence using and in the middle, one using but, and one using or.)

6. A sentence starting with When . . . , Since . . . , Although . . . , If . . . , and Unless . . .

For example:

When a storm breaks out, my little baby brother always cries.

Since the weather has been so cool, our picnic was held indoors this year.

Although some cars are expensive, others can be very reasonably priced.

If a cat arches its back, that usually means it is angry or frightened.

Unless we raise more money, our club will not be able to go to Europe.

7. A sentence starting with an -ing verb.

For example:

[Taking] careful aim with his rifle, Mr. Jamison shot a can off the fence.

(Mr. Jamison is the one taking careful aim.)