



Sentence Fragments

Sentence fragments are grammatically incomplete sentences. While fragments are often found in advertising and informal writing, they are viewed as a serious problem in academic and business writing. This handout explains what a sentence fragment is and provides a strategy to sentences to determine if they are fragmentary. The overview on identifying sentence fragments is accompanied by a challenge exercise. The handout also provides strategies for revising fragments and reviews common sentence patterns that often result in fragmentary sentences. Each section will include examples to demonstrate the principles and strategies covered in the handout.

What is a Sentence Fragment?

A sentence is fragmented when it is missing a subject, verb or object.

Below are three examples of sentence fragments.

Examples:

Sentence 1: Running through the forest.

Sentence 2: The blue shirt.

Sentence 3: I like.

In the examples above, sentence 1 is fragmented because it is missing a subject and a main verb; sentence 2 is fragmented because it is missing a verb; and sentence 3 is fragmented because it is missing an object.

Strategy for identifying sentence fragments

If you suspect a sentence to be fragmentary, try the following strategy to help determine if your sentence is really a fragment:

Test your sentence by writing “It is true that” before your suspected fragment. If the sentence makes sense, you have a complete sentence; if something seems missing, you probably have a fragment in need of revision. (Note that this strategy does not work with questions.)

Here are two examples of this strategy.

Example 1:

Suspected Fragment: The dog is large.

Test: It is true that the dog is large.

Conclusion: The test sentence is complete and makes sense. Therefore “the dog is large” is **not** a sentence fragment.

Example 2:

Suspected Fragment: I like.

Test: It is true that I like.

Conclusion: The test sentence is not complete and seems to be missing information (in this case it is not clear what I like). Therefore “I like” **is** a sentence fragment.

Challenge

Try to find the six fragments in the following passage. If you’re not sure whether or not a sentence is fragmentary, use the strategy above to test for fragments.

Challenge passage:

A recent cyanide spill in Romania has drawn worldwide attention. The January 30, 2000, incident occurred when a dam at a gold mine broke and released 100,000 cubic metres of toxic sludge into the Szamos River, which flows into Hungary’s Tisza River. The scale of the resulting ecological disaster was vast. Killing virtually all aquatic life in a 400-metre stretch of the Tisza River. Which is home to 19 of the 29 species of protected fish in Hungary (WWF, 2000b). Besides killing over 100 tonnes of fish, the spill also endangered seabirds and other wildlife and affected drinking water supplies for cities along the affected waterways (WWF, 2000b). The most serious cyanide spill ever (WWF, 2000a). Although there have been other serious spills recorded.

This unprecedented case of freshwater pollution has also focused public attention on a number of other issues: inadequate environmental monitoring and response measures in many countries in Eastern Europe. Secondly, problems in enforcing international agreements related to trans-border pollution (WWF, 2000a). And, finally, woefully inadequate penalties for corporate polluters. According to one report, the company responsible for the January 30 spill was fined only \$166 US (WWF, 2000a).

References

World Wildlife Fund. (2000a). The biggest ever freshwater disaster in Central and Eastern Europe. Available at Panda.org/news/press/news.cfm?id=1850.

World Wildlife Fund. (2000b). WWF demands immediate government action on toxic spill. Available at Panda.org/news/press/news.cfm?id=1848.

Challenge Exercise Key

How did you do on the exercise? Compare your answers to the following key. There are six sentence fragments in the passage. In the key, the six fragments appear in **bold** type. The six sentence fragments will also be listed, following the passage.

Passage key

A recent cyanide spill in Romania has drawn worldwide attention. The scale of the resulting ecological disaster was vast. **Killing virtually all aquatic life in a 400-metre stretch of the Tisza River. Which is home to 19 of the 29 species of protected fish in Hungary (WWF, 2000b).** Besides killing over 100 tonnes of fish, the spill also endangered seabirds and other wildlife and affected drinking water supplies for cities along the affected waterways (WWF, 2000b). **The most serious cyanide spill ever (WWF, 2000a). Although there have been other serious spills recorded.**

This unprecedented case of freshwater pollution has also focused public attention on a number of other issues: inadequate environmental monitoring and response measures in many countries in Eastern Europe. **Secondly, problems in enforcing international agreements related to trans-border pollution (WWF, 2000a). And, finally, woefully inadequate penalties for corporate polluters.** According to one report, the company responsible for the January 30 spill was fined only \$166 U.S. (WWF, 2000a).

Sentence Fragments occurring in the passage

1. Killing virtually all aquatic life in a 400-metre stretch of the Tisza River.
2. Which is home to 19 of the 29 species of protected fish in Hungary.
3. The most serious cyanide spill ever.
4. Although there have been other serious spills recorded.
5. Secondly, problems in enforcing international agreements related to trans-border pollution.
6. And, finally, woefully inadequate penalties for corporate polluters.

Two strategies for fixing fragments

Using the “It is true that” test, we can see if something seems missing in a fragmentary sentence. Once you have identified a sentence fragment, you can fix the problem using one of the following two strategies. Each strategy will be accompanied by an example that used a sentence fragment from the challenge exercise: “Killing virtually all aquatic life in a 400-metre stretch of the Tisza River.”

Strategy 1

Attach the fragment to an adjoining sentence with a comma.

Example:

The scale of the resulting ecological disaster was vast, killing virtually all aquatic life in a 400-metre stretch of the Tisza River.

Strategy 2

Rewrite the fragment so that it passes the “It is true that” sentence test.

Hint: Identify the main action and try starting the sentence with the “doer” of that action.

Example:

The **spill** killed virtually all aquatic life in a 400-metre stretch of the Tisza River.

Typical fragments patterns

There are certain sentence patterns that can result in the creation of sentence fragments. Here are a few patterns that can lead to fragmentary sentences. For each pattern there will be an example of the fragment and an example of a corrected version of the sentence.

Pattern 1: Starting a sentence with “Which” or “In which”

Fragment example: The spill killed virtually all aquatic life in a 400-metre stretch of the Tisza River. Which is home to 19 of the 29 species of protected fish in Hungary.

In the example above, the following sentence is fragmentary: “Which is home to 19 of the 29 species of protected fish in Hungary” is fragmentary. Here is a possible correction for this sentence:

Corrected sentence: The spill killed virtually all aquatic life in a 400-metre stretch of the Tisza River, which is home to 19 of the 29 species of protected fish in Hungary.

In the example above, the fragment was corrected by attaching the fragment to the preceding sentence with a comma.

Note: It is permissible to start a sentence with “Which” if it is a question.

Example: Which river is home to 19 of the 29 species of protected fish in Hungary?

Pattern 2: Starting a sentence with “For example”

Fragment Example: Viruses are resistant to antibiotics. **For example, the common cold and flu viruses.**

In the example above, the following sentence is fragmentary: “For example, the common cold and flu viruses.” Here is a possible correction for this sentence.

Corrected sentence 1: Viruses, such as the common cold and flu viruses, are resistant to antibiotics.

In the example above, the fragment was corrected by combining the two sentences.

However, it is permissible to start a sentence with “For example” as long as a complete thought follows that opening. Here is an example that corrects the fragment while still beginning the second sentence with “for example”.

Corrected sentence: Viruses are resistant to antibiotics. For example, penicillin is ineffective against flu viruses.

Pattern 3: Starting a sentence with “Although”

Fragment example: This was the most serious cyanide spill ever. **Although there have been other serious spills.**

In the example above, “Although there have been other serious spills” forms a fragmentary sentence. Here is a possible correction for this sentence.

Corrected sentence: This was the most serious cyanide spill ever, although there have been other serious spills.

In the example above, the fragmentary sentence was corrected by attaching the fragment to the preceding sentence with a comma.

Pattern 4: Using “-ing” participles instead of a main verb in a sentence

Fragment example: Many universities are seeking private sector funding. **Budget cutbacks being one reason.**

In the example above, “budget cutbacks being one reason” is a fragment because the participle “being” cannot act as the main verb of a sentence” Here is a possible correction for this sentence.

Corrected sentence: Many universities are seeking private sector funding. Budget cutbacks are one reason.

This fragment was corrected by replacing the participle form of the verb “be” with a verbal form of “be”. In this case, the plural form of the verb “be” (“are”) is used to match the plural subject of the sentence (“budget cutbacks”).