

Sentence Patterns

This handout gives an overview of English sentence patterns. It will help you identify subjects, verbs, and clause connectors so you can analyze your writing style and improve it by using a variety of sentence patterns.

Subjects, Verbs, and Clauses

In its simplest form, an English sentence has two parts: a subject and a verb that express a complete thought when they are together.

The **subject** shows who or what is doing the action. It is always some form of noun or pronoun.

The **verb** shows the action or the state of being. It can be an action verb, like "run," or a state verb, like "seem."

Examples of simple two word sentences include:

Marvin slept.

Dogs bark.

Isotopes react.

Real sentences are rarely so short. We usually want to convey much more information, so we modify the main subject and verb with other words and phrases, as in the sentences below:

Unfortunately, **Marvin** slept fitfully.

Dogs bark louder after midnight.

Heavy **isotopes** react slower than light isotopes of the same element.

Despite the extra information, each of these sentences has one subject and one verb, so it's still just one clause. What's a clause?

A **clause** is the combination of a subject and a verb. When you have a subject and verb, you have a clause. Pretty easy, isn't it? We're going to concentrate on clauses in this handout, with emphasis on these two in particular:

1. **Independent clause:** a subject and verb that make a complete thought. Independent clauses are called independent because they can stand on their own and make sense.
2. **Dependent clause:** a subject and verb that don't make a complete thought. Dependent clauses always need to be attached to an independent clause (they're too weak to stand alone).

We'll talk more about dependent clauses later on, but also see the [handout on fragments](#) for a more detailed description of these types of clauses.

Something tricky

Before we move on to the sentence types, you should know a little trick of subjects and verbs: they can double up in the same clause. These are called "compound" subjects or verbs because there are two or more of them in the same clause.

Compound subject (two subjects related to the same verb):

Javier and his colleagues collaborated on the research article.

Compound verb (two verbs related to the same subject):

Javier conducted the experiment and documented the results.

Compound subject with compound verb:

Javier, his colleagues, and their advisor drafted and revised the article several times.

Notice that they don't overlap. You can tell that it's only one clause because all of the subjects in one clause come before all of the verbs in the same clause.

Four Basic Patterns

Every sentence pattern below describes a different way to combine clauses. When you are drafting your own papers or when you're revising them for sentence variety, try to determine how many of these patterns you use. If you favor one particular pattern, your writing might be kind of boring if every sentence has exactly the same pattern. If you find this is true, try to revise a few sentences using a different pattern.

NOTE: Because nouns can fill so many positions in a sentence, it's easier to analyze sentence patterns if you **find the verbs** and **find the connectors**. The most common connectors are listed below with the sentence patterns that use them.

In the descriptions below, S=Subject and V=Verb, and options for arranging the clauses in each sentence pattern given in parentheses. **Connecting words** and the associated punctuation are highlighted in brown. Notice how the punctuation changes with each arrangement.

Pattern 1: Simple Sentence

One independent clause (SV.)

Mr. Potato Head eats monkeys.

I refuse.

Try this: Look for sentences in your own text that have only one clause. Mark them with a certain color so they stand out.

Pattern 2: Compound Sentence

Two or more independent clauses. They can be arranged in these ways: (SV, and SV.) or (SV; however, SV.)

Connectors with a comma, the FANBOYS: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so (See the handout on commas for more info.)

Connectors with a semicolon and comma: however, moreover, nevertheless, nonetheless, therefore

Example compound sentences:

Mr. Potato Head eats them for breakfast every day, but I don't see the attraction.

Eating them makes him happy; however, he can't persuade me.

Try this:

Scan your own text to find the compound connectors listed above. Circle them.

Find the verb and the subject of the clauses on both sides of the connectors.

Highlight your compound sentences with a color that's different from the one you used to mark your simple sentences.

Pattern 3: Complex Sentence

One independent clause PLUS one or more dependent clauses. They can be arranged in these ways: (SV because SV.) or (Because SV, SV.) or (S, because SV, V.) Connectors are always at the beginning of the dependent clause. They show how the dependent clause is related to the independent clause. This list shows different types of relationships along with the connectors that indicate those relationships:

Cause/Effect: because, since, so that

Comparison/Contrast: although, even though, though, whereas, while

Place/Manner: how, however, where, wherever

Possibility/Conditions: if, whether, unless

Relation: that, which, who, whom

Time: after, as, before, since, when, whenever, while, until

Examples of complex sentences:

He recommends them highly because they taste like chicken when they are hot.

Although chicken always appeals to me, I still feel skeptical about monkey.

Mrs. Potato Head, because she loves us so much, has offered to make her special monkey souffle for us.

Try this:

Scan your own text to find the complex connectors listed above. Circle them.

Find the verb and the subject of the clauses that goes with each connector, remembering that the dependent clause might be in between the subject and verb of the independent clause, as shown in the arrangement options above.

Highlight your complex sentences with a color that's different from the one you used to mark your simple sentences.

Pattern 4: Compound-Complex Sentence

Two or more independent clauses PLUS one or more dependent clauses. They can be arranged in these ways: (SV, and SV because SV.) or (Because SV, SV, but SV.)

Connectors: All of the connectors listed under Patterns 2 & 3 are used. Find the connectors, then find the verbs

and subjects that are part of each clause.

Mr. Potato Head said that he would share the secret recipe; however, if he shares it with me, Mrs. Potato Head will feed him to the piranhas, so he is safer, and I am happier if I don't eat monkeys or steal recipes.

Try this: Use a fourth color to highlight the compound-complex sentences in your text (the ones with at least two independent and at least one dependent clauses).

Look at the balance of the four different colors. Do you see one color standing out? Do you notice one missing entirely? If so, examine your text carefully while you ask these questions:

Could you separate some of the more complex sentences?

Could you combine some of the shorter sentences?

Can you use different arrangement options for each of the sentence patterns?

Can you use different connectors if you change the order of the clauses?



This work is licensed by The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/).