

SENTENCE STRUCTURES

A well-written sentence, as a minimum, **MUST** fulfill the following **two** criteria which you should constantly check when you are proofreading and editing your own work. It must be:

- Grammatically correct (language) **AND**
- Semantically correct (meaning)

In order to build a sentence in English that is grammatically correct and makes sense, it is important to firstly understand the basic principles of sentence structures. Essentially, sentence formations can be divided into **four** types:

- Simple
- Compound
- Complex
- Compound-complex sentences

The secret to good writing is VARIATION!

A **simple sentence** is one independent clause in a subject-verb pattern:

The Australian government introduced an official carbon tax on 1 July 2012.

A **compound sentence** is two independent clauses connected by a coordinating conjunction:

*The Australian government introduced an official carbon tax on 1 July 2012, **but** this was met with opposition from the general public.*

A **complex sentence** consists of an independent clause and a dependent clause:

***As** the Australian government recognised the necessity to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions, it introduced an official carbon tax on 1 July 2012.*

A **compound-complex sentence** consists of more than one independent clause and one or more dependent clauses:

***As** the Australian government recognised the necessity to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions, it introduced an official carbon tax on 1 July 2012, **but** this was met with opposition from the general public.*

You should attempt to use a combination of the above sentence structures in your writing.

Two errors that are commonly found in students' work are:

- Sentence fragments
- Run-on sentences

Sentence fragments

A sentence fragment is missing some of its parts. There are three main reasons why a sentence may be incomplete.

- Missing subject
 - Becoming extinct because of rising sea temperatures.*
 - Phytoplankton** could become extinct because of rising sea temperatures.*
- Missing verb
 - Significantly, one particular form of Western Australian finch.*
 - Significantly, one particular form of Western Australian finch **has decreased in numbers.***

- Incomplete thought

In a recent article about loss of habitat due to climate change.

*In a recent article about loss of habitat due to climate change, **Australian animals were shown to be particularly vulnerable.***

Sentences beginning with words like **so, as, because, who, which, that**, are often incomplete.

Poor example containing sentence fragments:

Climate change is threatening flora and fauna around the world. As at-risk species become less populous and eventually disappear from the planet (1). The food chains in which they existed may become unsustainable (1). For example, organisms such as phytoplankton are affected by rising sea temperatures these are essential food sources (2). According to Parry (2010), make up 50 percent of carbon-based matter on the planet have been decreasing in numbers (3). The consequences of phytoplankton becoming extinct are of major concern.

(1= Incomplete thought / 2 = Run-on / 3 = No subject)

Improved example:

Climate change is threatening flora and fauna around the world. As at-risk species become less populous and eventually disappear from the planet, the food chains in which they existed may become unsustainable (1). For example, organisms such as phytoplankton are affected by rising sea temperatures. These are essential food sources (2). According to Parry (2010), phytoplankton make up 50 percent of carbon-based matter on the planet and have been decreasing in numbers (3). The consequences of phytoplankton becoming extinct are of major concern.

(1 = Joined the fragment / 2 = Two sentences / 3 = Added subject)

Run-on sentences

A run-on sentence occurs when two simple sentences are incorrectly joined:

*Poverty, famine and major public health problems around the developing world are important indicators of a changing climate **these issues are not being addressed globally.***

There are two ways to resolve a run-on sentence:

1. Use a joining or linking word such as *and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet*.

*Poverty, famine and major public health problems around the developing world are an important indicator of a changing climate, **but** these issues are not being addressed globally.*

2. Make two separate sentences.

*Poverty, famine and major public health problems around the developing world are an important indicator of a changing climate. **These issues are not being addressed globally.***

Sentence length

You need to **vary** the length of sentences in your paragraphs. This is important to **add interest** to your writing, readability and to show relationships between ideas. Notice in the following example that all sentences are similar in length and structure. The ideas are not linked, making the writing disjointed.

Poor example:

Recent changes in the sea, land and atmosphere have made it more difficult for animals and plants to sustain themselves. Derocher (2008), for example, claims that the ice cap in the Arctic is shrinking. This change constitutes a loss of feeding and breeding areas for polar bears. Polar bears are not alone in their loss of habitat. According to Walsh (2008) warming of the atmosphere in Costa Rica may have caused some species to become extinct. As the atmosphere gradually warms, they have nowhere to go and may eventually die out (Walsh 2008). These particular instances of an adversely affected environment may seem isolated and inconsequential. They may have profound effects on the subtle natural balances that all life exists within.

Improved example:

Recent changes in the sea, land and atmosphere have made it more difficult for animals and plants to sustain themselves. Derocher (2008), for example, claims that the ice cap in the Arctic is shrinking and that this change constitutes a loss of feeding and breeding areas for polar bears.

[Polar bears are not alone in their loss of habitat. According to Walsh (2008) warming of the atmosphere in Costa Rica may have caused some species to become extinct. As the atmosphere gradually warms, they have nowhere to go and may eventually die out (Walsh 2008). While these particular instances of an adversely affected environment may seem isolated and inconsequential, they may have profound effects on the subtle natural balances that all life exists within.

Notice the way the two sentences are combined to emphasise the cause/effect relationship

-- Notice how the shorter sentence provides a contrast and makes the reading easier.

Source:

RMIT University 2012, *Learning Lab*, viewed 19 September 2012, <<http://emedia.rmit.edu.au/learninglab/content/sentence-construction-0>>.

