Academic writing: sentence level

Sentences

• In academic writing, every sentence you write must be grammatically complete.

• A grammatically complete sentence consists of a complete thought, and can make sense on its own.

• It consists of a subject, a verb, and a complement if required.

• A subject (i.e. a noun phrase, which can be a single word or group of words) tells you who or what the sentence is about.

• A verb (i.e. a verb phrase, which can be a single word or group of words) tells you about the subject.

• A complement (a group of words) provides more information about the verb.

• Example of a complete sentence and its elements:
  The result of the study confirmed the writer's hypothesis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The result of the study</th>
<th>subject</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>confirmed</td>
<td>verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the writer’s hypothesis</td>
<td>complement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• The sentence above is a simple sentence, in that it consists of only one clause (i.e. any group of words that contains a subject and a verb, which may or may not be a complete sentence).

• Many sentences consist of more than one clause; they may contain two or more independent clauses (i.e. clauses that contain the essential information and make sense on their own), or a combination of independent and dependent clauses (i.e. clauses that do not contain essential information, and depend on the main clause to express a complete thought). Examples:
Although the result of the study was inconclusive, the committee decided to implement the policy.

If the result of the study confirmed the writer’s hypothesis, it would be a major breakthrough in the world of biochemistry.

- A sentence is incomplete if it does not express a complete thought, even if it contains a subject and a verb (see the dependent clauses above). It is known as a sentence fragment.
- In summary, a complete sentence has a subject, a verb, and expresses a complete thought. It begins with a capital letter, and ends with an appropriate punctuation (i.e. full stop, question mark or exclamation mark).

**Active and passive sentences**

- In an active sentence, the subject is the performer of the action.
- In a passive sentence, the subject is the receiver of the action.
- Example of an active sentence and the its passive construction:
  - Active: The university conducted the study in 2008.
  - Passive: The study was conducted by the university in 2008.
- The active voice is the way we usually learn to construct sentences in English; it has the advantage of being clear and direct.
- In situations where you want to be less direct and more tactful, you would want to use the passive voice.
- Using the passive voice also allows you to:
  - direct the audience to focus on the information or argument being presented, and not on the writer or speaker
  - omit any mention of the actor or agent where it is unimportant or unknown
place certain material at the end of the clause so that it may receive the emphasis of final position.

**Common errors in sentence structure**

1. **Sentence fragments**
   - A sentence fragment is a group of words that does not express a complete idea, and cannot make sense on its own. To complete it, additional information needs to be added. Examples:
     Incorrect: Although the result of the study was inconclusive.
     Correct: Although the result of the study was inconclusive, the committee decided to implement the policy.
     Incorrect: If the result of the study confirmed the writer’s hypothesis.
     Correct: If the result of the study confirmed the writer’s hypothesis, it would be a major breakthrough in the world of biochemistry.
   - It is usually an incomplete idea, consisting of a dependent clause.
   - Often, when a sentence begins with a conjunction (e.g. after, although, as, because, before, since, unless, until, when, which, while, etc.), it is a dependent clause.
   - A sentence can also be a fragment if it does not contain a subject and/or a verb.
     Examples:
     The study conducted by the university.
     The result of the study.
     Conducted by the university in 2008.

2. **Run-on sentences**
   - A run-on sentence occurs when two independent clauses (of two complete thoughts) are blended into one without proper punctuation. Examples:
     The survey shows that more than 80% of the population agrees that racism is rife however only 12% of the population admits that they are racist.
     More than 80% of the population agrees that racism is rife, 12% of the population admits that they are racist.
• To repair run-on sentences:

• place a full stop between the two independent clauses; examples:
  Incorrect: The survey shows that more than 80% of the population agrees that racism is rife however only 12% of the population admits that they are racist.
  Correct: The survey shows that more than 80% of the population agrees that racism is rife. However, only 12% of the population admits that they are racist.

• place a semi colon between the two independent clauses; examples:
  Incorrect: More than 80% of the population agrees that racism is rife, 12% of the population admits that they are racist.
  Correct: More than 80% of the population agrees that racism is rife; 12% of the population admits that they are racist.

• place a comma and a linking word (e.g. which, and) between the two independent clauses; examples:
  Incorrect: More than 80% of the population agrees that racism is rife, 12% of the population admits that they are racist.
  Correct: More than 80% of the population agrees that racism is rife, and 12% of the population admits that they are racist.

• change the less important complete idea of the two into a dependent clause, thereby creating a complex sentence; examples:
  Incorrect: More than 80% of the population agrees that racism is rife, 12% of the population admits that they are racist.
  Correct: Although more than 80% of the population agrees that racism is rife, only 12% of the population admits that they are racist.

3. Subject-verb agreement

• All subjects in English sentences are either singular or plural.

• A singular subject needs a singular verb, and a plural subject needs a plural verb.

• Ignore words (within the commas) that come between the subject and verb.
  Examples:
  The textbook, as well as these journal articles, is essential for the assignment.
  These journal articles, along with the textbook, are essential for the assignment.
• When the subject consists of two or more nouns joined by and, a plural verb is used. Phrases like as well as, in addition to, and along with are not the same as and; they do not change the number of subject (see 1). Examples:

These journal articles and the textbook are essential for the assignment.

• Single subjects joined by or, nor, either…or, or neither…nor take a singular verb. Example:
Neither the textbook nor the journal article is of any relevance to the assignment.

• If one subject is singular and the other is plural, the verb used should agree with the closest subject when two or more nouns are joined by or, nor, either…or, or neither…nor. Examples:
Neither the textbook nor these journal articles are of any relevance to the assignment.
Neither these journal articles nor the textbook is of any relevance to the assignment.

• In sentences starting with there is/are and here is/are, the verb used has to agree with what follows since there and here function as subject fillers. Examples:
Here is the journal article for the assignment.
There are a few textbooks I need for the new semester.

• Collective nouns such as team, committee, family and class require singular verbs if acting as a whole, and plural verbs if acting as individuals. Examples:
The tutorial class is divided into several groups for the group assignment.
Members of the group are reminded that they have to do their fair share of work.
Adapted from the following sources:

