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SENTENCE DEFINITIONS MATTER: RESPECT THE CLAUSE

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Defining different sentence structures is not always necessary for students but I believe that understanding sentence construction helps me be a better teacher for writers. The area of understanding sentences is muddled because many of us have not been instructed explicitly in sentences and many incorrect or incomplete definitions abound. Sometimes, it can feel like a technical nightmare and causes fights we don't really want to have, but I believe understanding the clause is key to writing that is correct and clear. This article aims to address some of the common errors that are around.

EXAMPLES OF INCOMPLETE SENTENCE DEFINITIONS

Any definition of sentence structures, simple, compound or complex, should include mention of the clause. Without inclusion of the clause, we get incorrect or incomplete sentence definitions which do not serve us or our learners well.

The clause is the premise of the sentence. It includes the subject (who or what) and a claim about that subject (what it is doing, having, or being). In other words, there must be a subject and a verb (or verb phrase/predicate).¹

1. Incomplete definition: simple sentence

- A simple sentence has a capital letter, a full stop and is one complete thought.
- A full stop goes at the end of your idea.
- Read aloud to see where the full stops go.

Why this is unhelpful

Each of those definitions could result in punctuation errors. Young children will not know what is meant by a complete thought or end of an idea. Just adding a capital letter and full stop does not mean the outcomes will be correct. Children can often not tell when they read aloud where the sentences should end. An oral understanding of a sentence is different from a written understanding because we do not need punctuation in our spoken sentences.

Possible outcomes

Writers will leave out full stops because they do not recognise 'end of an idea'.

E.g., "The day was cold it started out frosty" might seem like a complete idea to a child, but it should be: "The day was cold. It started out frosty."

¹ The coloured card system in the book *How to Build Writing Success Sentence by Sentence* explains how to teach the clause from y1-8.

Solution definition

A sentence (simple) has one clause with a subject (who/what) and a verb or verb phrase.

A sentence tells of a subject and what that subject does (or has or is).

We do put a capital letter at the beginning of the sentence and a full stop at the end, but this is necessary but not sufficient in ensuring correct sentence structure.

NB: the verb phrase can have extra information added in an adverbial phrase saying when, where, how, or why. The sentence is still simple because it only has one clause. E.g. "The silver shark swam around the bay, looking for food to eat." This sentence can also be written as "Around the bay, the silver shark swam, looking for food." Or "Looking for food, the silver shark swam around the bay." Each example has one clause. Each example is a simple or expanded simple sentence.

2. Incomplete definition: compound sentence

- A compound sentence has a co-ordinating conjunction and a comma before the conjunction.
- Technically the definition is not incorrect, but it does not tell us what is being co-ordinated.

Why this is unhelpful

The critical point of a compound sentence is that there are two clauses and that a comma CAN be used after the conjunction if there are two full clauses visible. You will note that Word will put double blue lines in to show a grammar error if you put a comma before the and in the above incomplete definition. The definition does not help in understanding what a compound sentence is.

Possible outcomes

One outcome that happens from this incomplete definition is placement of commas where they are not needed.

The car went off the road, and required repair.

In this example, the comma does not mark off complete clauses. A correct example would be:

The car went off the road, and it needed repair.

Word will put blue lines under the first example and not under the second example.

Solution definition

A compound sentence is two independent clauses joined by a co-ordinating conjunction.

The definition could have the additional statement that a comma can be used before the conjunction, but only when two full clauses (subject and verb) are evident. It is important to know that the use of the comma is not what distinguishes the sentence as compound, so this piece of information is not critical to defining a compound sentence.²

Personally, I am careful about introducing the idea of the comma when students are just getting used to the full stop. The omission of the comma does not make the sentence incorrect but the omission of clauses does.

² NB: For those who learned, like I did, that a comma is not needed in a compound sentence, it may help to think of the comma as marking off the clauses. The comma identifies to the reader that a whole new clause is on its way. Personally, I sometimes use the comma and sometimes do not, depending on length of the second clause and its relationship to the first clause. I may review this over time but currently that is my practice.

3. Incomplete definition: complex sentence

- A complex sentence has one part of the sentence that cannot stand alone.

Why this is unhelpful

Firstly, this is unhelpful because any sentence has a part that cannot stand alone. For example: "Early on a cold frosty morning, I went for a walk in the neighbourhood." The part of the sentence "Early on a cold frosty morning..." does not make sense by itself, but this is an additional phrase to a simple sentence and is still a simple sentence.

Again, there is no mention of the clause in this definition, making the definition incomplete and unhelpful and quite misleading.

Possible outcomes

Largely, the result is incorrect classification of sentences that are simple but saying they are complex. This outcome is not a worry unless you are using it to judge the success of the writing. Some assessments level pieces of work by their inclusion of complex sentences for example. However, I do think the definition matters, so learners can build from these foundational understandings into ever more sophisticated sentence crafting that is also technically correct.

Solution definition

A complex sentence has two clauses, an independent clause (or main clause) and a dependent clause (or sub clause).

"I am hungry. I just went for a run." These are two simple sentences separated by a full stop.

"I am hungry because I just went for a run." This is a complex sentence. The subordinating conjunction 'because' attaches to the independent clause "I just went for a run" and makes that clause dependent on the main clause or no longer able to stand alone.

The power of the complex sentence is that it enables the writer to vary their sentences and play with the effect they want. It feels different for the reader if the dependent clause is placed first. "Because I just went for a run, I am hungry."

NB: The comma is used when the dependent clause precedes the main clause. We are letting the reader know that the main clause is coming. Both examples are complex sentences, whether the dependent clause is placed first or after the main clause.

IS IT IMPORTANT TO USE DIFFERENT SENTENCE STRUCTURES?

One sentence type is not necessarily superior to another. Knowing how to define sentence structures is less important than knowing how to use them. Some understanding comes from spoken language skill but knowing how to write these in a technically correct way largely requires understanding of the structures. The main point here is that writers have a range of tools they can use to make the best piece of writing for their audience. Our job as teachers is to give students opportunities to try different ways and to feel confident as they develop their skill as writers.

They need to master the simple sentence as the foundation for other structures but also because they are important in any piece of writing. Short simple sentences can be powerful. E.g., "It rained. It rained all night. It rained all day. It rained on the fields. It rained on the sea." There's a certain rhythm and the reader sits up and pays attention. But too much of this would be tiresome.

Intentional joining of two clauses to make a compound sentence is a useful skill. E.g., "It rained. It rained all night and it rained all day. It rained on the hills, and it rained over fields." This example joins similar ideas (day and night/ hills and fields). It is a good technique in the writer's toolbox. Now the writer can make a choice as to the rhythm and impact they are looking for.

Reducing the redundancies in the compound sentence is another technique to try. Largely, this is an exercise in sentence combining, combining ideas to produce a different sort of sentence. E.g., "It rained. It rained all night and rained all day. It rained on the fields and rained on the sea." Another reduction could be "It rained all night and all day. It rained on hills and over fields". The sentence may be an improvement on the above compound, depending on the effect the writer wants. Whether this is technically a compound sentence (with an assumed subject) or a simple sentence (a subject and a compound verb phrase) is a different battle than the focus of this article.³

Complex sentence structures are an important part of writing technique. The term complex sentence might suggest that these are better than simple sentences, but this is just not true. For instance, the inclusion of complex sentences may not denote any real complexity or sophistication. For example, "The yard got flooded because it rained all night" is a complex sentence because of the use of a sub-ordinating conjunction (because) and two full clauses. The other side of the coin is that expanded simple sentences can be more sophisticated than this complex one. For example, this simple sentence "It rained all day and night, across hills and fields, flooding the small town."

SUMMING UP

Sentence construction is a fascinating and sometimes complicated area to explore and explain. It is fascinating because understanding the basics can help us be correct and clear. Sentence understanding also helps us vary our writing and be in control of the impact it has. That feels wonderful. But it can be complicated because taking our spoken thoughts and putting them into technically correct written form is not always straightforward. It is also complicated because there are nuances and weeds we can get stuck in.

Being in control of how we craft sentences and having these be technically correct is powerful for any writer. The power means the author has choices. Choices are part of the fun of writing and technical understanding puts us on the pathway to enjoy writing, to feel in charge, and to want to do more of it. A writer who knows how to manipulate sentences by moving around clauses and phrases is a writer who will produce better pieces than when they do not have this knowledge. Labelling the sentences can be unnecessary but it is useful knowledge for the teacher. We make better explanations when we understand the importance of the clause.

And finally, sentence definitions need to be correct. They need to lead us in a straightforward manner to be able to explain them to students and to give helpful, precise feedback on any errors or give suggestions about possible alternatives.

The understanding of the place of the clause is useful and powerful. Yay for the clause.

REFERENCE

Braid, C. (2025). *How to Build Writing Success Sentence by Sentence*. Essential Resources [How to Build Writing Success Sentence by Sentence](#)

³ Personally, for the purposes of getting a clear understanding about the clause for our primary-aged students, I would suggest that being able to locate two full clauses with a subject and a verb is a way for clarity about clauses. But it largely doesn't matter so I'll choose not to get stuck in these weeds.