

# Sentence Patterns

## What this handout is about

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 and Verbs

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 more slowly 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. But just what exactly *is* a **clause**?

## Clauses

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 clauses, in particular:

1. **Independent clause:** a subject and verb combination that makes 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 combinations that **doesn't make a complete thought**. Dependent clauses **always** need to be attached to an independent clause because they're too weak to stand alone. A dependent clause that is not attached to an independent clause is a **fragment**, which is a potentially serious grammatical error.

### 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 a bit boring if every sentence has exactly the same pattern. If you find this is true, try to revise a few sentences by 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**, **V=Verb**, **SV=Subject and Verb**, and options for arranging the clauses in each sentence pattern given in parentheses. 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 (**coordinating conjunctions**): **for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.**

Connectors with a semicolon and comma (**conjunctive adverbs**): **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.

### **Using colors to find subjects, verbs, and clauses:**

- 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:** where, wherever, how, however
- **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 soufflé for us.
- She can cook it however she wants.
- Although I am curious, I am still skeptical.

### **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: Connectors listed under Patterns 2 and 3 are used here. 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 does, Mrs. Potato Head will feed him to the piranhas, so we are both safer and 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 in your text. 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 handout was adapted from the "Sentence Patterns" handout from the University of North Carolina Writing Center handouts collection.**