Module Resources – Sentence Structures

When building anything, it is important to be familiar with the tools you are using. Grammatical elements are the main "tools" you use when when building sentences longer written works. Thus, it is critical to have some understanding of grammatical terminology in order to construct effective sentences.

The two essential parts of a sentence are the **subject** and the **predicate** (verb portion). The subject refers to the topic being discussed while the verb conveys the action or state of being expressed in the sentence. All clauses must contain both a subject and a verb; phrases, on the other hand, lack one or both a subject and a verb, so they need to relate to or modify other parts of the sentence. Main clauses, also called **independent** clauses, can stand on their own and convey an idea. **Dependent** clauses, also called **subordinate** clauses, rely on another part of the sentence for meaning and can't stand on their own.

Consider the following examples:

Independent Clause	Phrases	
1. The **engineers** stood around the table	looking at the schematics	for the machine.
(**subject**) (verb) (phrase)	(phrase)	(phrase)

Sentence 1

Sentence 1 is a simple sentence. It has one clause, with one **subject** (The engineers) and one verb (stood). These are followed by 3 modifying phrases ("around the table" "looking at the schematics" and "for the machine").

Dependent Clause			Independent Clause		
2. After **they** discussed different options,			**they** decided to re-design the components.		
Sub. Conj. (**subject**) (verb) (object)			(**subject**) (verb) (phrase)		

Sentence 2

Sentence 2 is a complex sentence, with one dependent and one independent clause, each with its own **subject**–verb combination ("**they** discussed" and "**they** decided"). The two clauses are joined by the subordinate conjunction, "after," which makes the first clause subordinate to (or dependent upon) the second one.

Being able to identify the critical parts of the sentence will help you design sentences that have a clear and effective subject-verb relationship. Knowing the components will also help you improve your punctuation.

There are four main types of sentence structures: simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex. In the examples above, Sentence 1 is a simple sentence, while Sentence 2 is complex.

SIMPLE SENTENCES have one main clause (one subject + one verb) and any number of phrases. The following are all simple sentences:

> A simple sentence can be very effective.
>
> It makes one direct point.
>
> It is good for creating emphasis and clarity.
>
> Too many in a row can sound repetitive and choppy.
>
> Varied sentence structure sounds more natural.

COMPOUND SENTENCES have two or more main clauses joined by **coordinating conjunctions** (CC) such as *and, but, for, yet, nor, or, so (FANBOYS)*. You can also connect them using punctuation such as a semi-colon or a colon.

By **coordinating** the ideas, you are giving them roughly equal weight and importance.

> Subject + verb,   CC   Subject + verb

The following sentences are all compound:

> A compound sentence coordinates two ideas**, and** each idea is given roughly equal weight.
>
> The two ideas are closely related**, so** you don't want to separate them with a period.
>
> The two clauses make up part of the same idea**; thus**, they should be part of the same sentence.
>
> The two clauses may express a parallel idea; they might also have a parallel structure.
>
> You must remember to include the coordinate conjunction, **or** you may commit a comma splice.

COMPLEX SENTENCES express complex and usually unequal relationships between ideas. One idea is "**subordinated**" to the main idea by using a "**subordinate conjunction**" (like "while" or "although"); one idea is "dependent" upon the other one for logic and completeness. **Complex sentences** include one main clause and at least one dependent clause (see Example 2 above). Often, it is stylistically effective to begin your sentence with the dependent clause, and place the main clause at the end for emphasis.

Subord. Conjunction + subject + verb (*this is the dependent clause*), Subject + verb (*this is the main clause*)

The following are all examples of complex sentences:

> **When** you make a complex sentence, you subordinate one idea to another.
>
> **If** you place the subordinate clause first, you give added emphasis to the main clause at the end.

Subordinate clauses cannot stand on their own. Despite the fact that many students try to use them that way. x (*fragment*)

COMPOUND-COMPLEX SENTENCES have at least two main clauses and at least one dependent clause. Because a compound-complex sentence is usually quite long, you must be careful that it makes sense; it is easy for the reader to get lost in a long sentence.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Using a variety of sentence types as well as using these types strategically to convey your ideas will strengthen your style. Keep the following in mind:

> **Simple sentences** are great for emphasis. The make great topic sentences.
>
> **Compound sentences** balance ideas; they are great for conveying the equal importance of related ideas.
>
> **Complex sentences**, when you use them effectively, show complicated relationships between ideas by subordinating one idea to another.