# The UVic Writer's Guide

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## *Fragments*

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A **sentence fragment** is a piece of a sentence which has been punctuated as if it were a complete sentence. Usually it is a [phrase](phrase) or subordinate [clause](clause) which has been improperly separated from a main clause:

Matt has been improving at school. *Since he stopped skipping class.*

It was the time of year when the neighbours would suddenly become uncharacteristically generous, pressing quantities of enormous zucchini on us. *It being the most prolific of vegetables.*

The sentences must be reconnected:

*Matt has been improving at school since he stopped skipping class.*

*It was the time of year when the neighbours would suddenly become uncharacteristically generous, pressing quantities of enormous zuccini on us, it being the most prolific of vegetables.*

Every sentence must have a main clause, and thus a complete [verb](verb).

Particularly in works of fiction, a sentence fragment can be a rhetorically effective device, but in formal writing it is more likely to be simply inept.

**A tip:** if you are unsure of the distinction between a complete verb and an incomplete one, or a main clause and a [participle](participle) phrase, there is a simple test you can apply to find out if you have a sentence fragment, or a comma splice:

- Each complete sentence will make a complete statement, and each complete statement must be either true or false.
- Thus if you ask of the fragment above--"Since he stopped skipping class": true or false-- there can be no answer (what happened since he stopped?), and thus it is not a complete sentence.

- Similarly, both parts of the comma splice can be tested ("They believed in Oedipus" and "He is their king"--both can be answered, in this case as "true"), so there are two complete statements.

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# *Run-On Sentences*

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A **run-on sentence** fuses two sentences together without any punctuation:

They believe in Oedipus he is their king.

This problem can be fixed in the same three ways as the [comma splice.](#)

# *The Comma Splice*

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The **comma splice** is the incorrect joining of two independent clauses with a comma is an extremely common error. Most frequently students connect two short sentences:

They believe in Oedipus, he is their king.

There are three ways to solve this problem:

1. **Use a period to separate the clauses into two sentences:**

   They believe in Oedipus. He is their king.

2. **Join the clauses with a coordinating or subordinating conjunction, depending on their relation to one another:**

   They believe in Oedipus, for he is their king.

3. **Join the clauses with a semicolon:**

   They believe in Oedipus; he is their king.

In this particular example, using the first option would result in sentences that are too short, too choppy. There is an obvious connection between the clauses which is best expressed through a conjunction; therefore, the second option is the best to use here.

In the following example, however, the writer has used a comma where a semi-colon is appropriate:

Sgnarelle is not the primary character, still he acts as a foil.

The clauses could form separate sentences, but the use of "still" implies a stronger link which is best served by a semi-colon:

Sgnarelle is not the primary character**;** still, he acts as a foil.

In this example, the clauses being connected are too complex to be part of the same sentence:

Lear was a majestic ruler when he was young, however, as he became older, his temptations clouded his thought.

Lear was a majestic ruler when he was young. However, as he became older, his temptations clouded his thought.

The writer could use a conjunction:

Lear was a majestic ruler when he was young, but as he became older his temptations clouded his thought.

A comma cannot, by itself, connect two main clauses; the clauses must either form separate sentences or be joined by a coordinating conjunction. For main clauses, see the Short Treatise on Grammar and the "tip" after "sentence fragments" in this section.

Note that conjunctive adverbs have the logical effect of linking ideas, but do not link sentences grammatically. In the last example the word *however* is one of these. Others to watch for are *therefore, thus,* and *this*.

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# The UVic Writer's Guide

# *Wordiness*

As wordiness is the writer's bane, we have covered it from various angles throughout this manual. Always dump the excess baggage from your essay; it will fly higher as a result.

- Avoid overusing **relative pronouns** such as *which* and *that*. Often they can be eliminated. For example, "The dog that you found yesterday" can be shortened to "The dog you found yesterday." The link is obvious.
- Avoid overusing **meaningless qualifiers** such as *quite, extremely* and *very*. Words such as these have lost their potency through overuse, and have become filler. Use a stronger word instead (*exhausted* rather than *very tired*). Many of these qualifiers appear in the Usage dictionary. Also stay away from phrases like "A great many of . . ." and "A great deal of . . ."
- Avoid **ponderous or vague constructions** such as *despite the fact that, due to the fact that, an aspect of,* and *the use of.*
- Avoid **excessively tentative language** such as *it seems that* and *appears to suggest.* Not only is it wordy, it also makes your argument appear weak. Only use these constructions if there is genuine uncertainty. If you are at all confident, write as if you are.
- Avoid **redundancies** . Do not write that someone is *naive and innocent* or *dull and boring.* These words are virtual synonyms. You do not have to provide a list where a single word will do. Be aware of a word's implications; for example, if you tell the reader that a woman is wearing a hat, you do not need to add "on her head." The reader will assume the hat is on her head because it is the nature of hats to be found on heads (if she is wearing it elsewhere, then it is worth mentioning).
- Avoid the **passive voice** which is possibly the greatest cause of wordiness.

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## *The Passive Voice*

In most cases, avoid the passive voice ("Jim is being driven to distraction by his hamster") in favor of the more concise active voice ("Jim's hamster is driving him to distraction"). A sentence is more effective when it centers on a subject that is doing something, rather than a subject that is being acted upon.

The passive voice is useful under certain circumstances; for example, if the precise subject of the action is not known ("My car was spray-painted last night") or if the receiver of the action is more important ("The Emperor was assassinated last night"). However, more often than not passive sentences can be improved by reworking the sentence so that the verb is active.

The main problem with passive sentences is that they are wordy: "The theme that was most dealt with by the 16th Century poets was . . ." can easily be condensed into "The 16th Century poets most often dealt with the theme of . . ." This next sentence is virtually incomprehensible because it uses too many passives: "Another illustration of the word 'master' being used to define material things as being the controlling element is . . ."

When you are providing examples, avoid passive constructions such as:

- "This is also seen when . . ."
- "It can be seen that . . ."
- "It is shown that . . ."

and so on. If you find it necessary to introduce material in this way, use active verbs: "One [we, I] can see that . . ."

Writers often use the passive voice to avoid "I," because they have been told from an early age that "I" is unacceptable. Different academic disciplines, and different instructors within those disciplines, have varying attitudes to the use of the personal pronoun: you would be wise to check. However, the sparing use of "I" can be an alternative to unwieldy passives like some of those cited above: "I think . . ." is both more effective stylistically and more honest than "It is thought that . . ." The passive is often used to avoid responsibility: "The economy of this Province has been mismanaged" is less incriminating than "We have mismanaged the economy of this Province."

Do not shift from active to passive in the same sentence:

As I entered the mansion, footsteps could be heard from behind me.

Both the verb and the subject have shifted. The sentence should read:

As I entered the mansion, I heard footsteps behind me.

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## *Parallelism*

The ability to write a good **parallel sentence** is invaluable in essay work. Faulty parallelism, on the other hand, produces an effect in your reader similar to changing gears without using the clutch. A successful parallel sentence reads smoothly, while a faulty parallel sentence lurches awkwardly.

The previous sentence is an example of good parallelism because it obeys the technique's central rule: **The grammatical elements of parallel clauses must match.** The following sentence is an example of poor parallelism because the verb form changes:

This is a debate begun in Greece and which continues into modern times.

*Begun* is a participial adjective while *continues* is an active verb. The sentence should read:

This debate began in Greece and continues into modern times.

The rule applies not only to verbs but also to nouns, adjectives, adverbs and other parts of speech. In the following sentence, for example, a noun has been mixed with a pair of verbal nouns (gerunds):

I acquired my considerable fortune by investing carefully, *hard work* and marrying a rich woman.

The sentence should read:

I acquired my considerable fortune by investing carefully, *working hard* and marrying a rich woman.

Watch for grammatical signposts that point to the need for careful parallel constructions.

- **Linking words** (such as *and, or, yet* and *but*) Often indicators of the need for parallel structure:

"I lost my heart in San Francisco, but I left my shoes in Santa Fe."

Parallel constructions also follow

*as*

is better to give than to appear cheap." Here, the *to* must be repeated to preserve the infinitive structure.

- **Correlative conjunctions** (pairs such as *either . . . or* and *both . . . and*) introduce clauses that must be parallel. The following sentence is incorrect because the verb forms are mixed:

  "We can either drive to the Grand Canyon or we're flying to Japan."

  The indecisive vacationer should say

  "We can either drive to the Grand Canyon or fly to Japan."

  *Not only . . . but* also can be tricky because of the placement of *only* and *also*, but the same rules apply;

  "He is not only the nicest person I have ever met, but also the most fragrant man I have ever sniffed."

  In a *not... neither* construction, the first negation can affect the meaning of the second. For example, if you write

  "Justin is not an ordinary person, and neither are his stories,"

  you are implying that the stories are not ordinary people. A more accurate assessment of Justin would be,

  "Justin is not ordinary, and neither are his stories."

- **Lists** also need to be parallel:

  "I like a good lunch, singing and to read"

  should read

  "I like eating a good lunch, singing and reading."

Parallelism is especially effective for [thesis sentences,](#) because you can incorporate all the sections of your argument in a unified manner:

"Because they are dangerous for children, they stick to carpets, and they are expensive to produce, Slime Balls should be banned from toy stores."

The parallel structure provides a clarity and balance which sharpens your thesis; in this instance the parallels also point the way to the three paragraphs you will be writing to support the thesis.

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## *Misplaced Modifiers*

A **modifying** **word or phrase** should be placed next to the word it describes. In the following sentence, the modifying phrase has been misplaced:

Growing at the bottom of the glass, Alison found some mold.

Since it is the mold that is growing at the bottom of the glass, rather than Alison, the sentence should read:

Alison found some mold growing at the bottom of the glass.

## *Dangling Modifier*

A **dangling [modifier](#)** modifies a word which has been left out of the sentence:

"After writing all that material, the computer didn't save it."

The computer did not do the writing; what is actually meant is "After writing that material, I discovered that the computer didn't save it," (or, more honestly, "After writing all that material, I forgot to save it"). The subject *I* was omitted from the original sentence.

The positioning of **limiting modifiers** such as *only, nearly* and *almost* is especially important. "Only Frank dropped the bomb," "Frank only dropped the bomb" and "Frank dropped the only bomb" all have different meanings.

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# *Squinting Modifier*

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A **squinting [modifier](#)** appears in the middle of the sentence, where its object is not clear: "I said eventually I would do it." The writer could mean

"Eventually, I said I would do it"

or

"I said I would do it eventually."

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# *Mixed Metaphors*

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A **mixed metaphor** attempts to create an extended comparison but fails because it is not consistent with itself. For example, in an essay on the language used in describing pain relief medicine, a student wrote:

"The topic of pain relievers seems clouded in a sea of medical terminology."

The metaphor is mixed because the images of cloud and sea do not match. The student should have said either "drowned in a sea of medical terminology" or "clouded in a fog of medical terminology." Metaphor can be effective, but do not put too much weight on your own ingenuity; it might collapse under the strain.

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# *Subject/Verb Agreement*

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Be sure that your subject **agrees** with the verb, even when there are intervening components of the sentence. In the sentence,

The group of bizarrely dressed youths *are* taking over the cafeteria,

The writer has used a plural verb because of the proximity of *youths*, but the subject of the sentence is *group*. The sentence should read:

The group of bizarrely dressed youths *is* taking over the cafeteria.

If there are two subjects joined by *and*, use a plural verb:

My mother and father *are* coming to visit.

If the subjects are joined by *or*, the verb must agree with the nearest subject:

Either Danny or Sandy *is* handling it.

Either Sherlock Holmes or the Hardy Boys *are* capable of solving this crime.

**Collective nouns** such as *family* take singular verbs when the sentence deals with the group as a whole:

The Griswold family *is* going on vacation this year.

If the sentence deals with the family as individuals, then a plural form is used:

The Griswold family are going to fight all the way through their vacation.

**Linking verbs** in [subjective completions](#) agree with the subject, not the completion:

My favourite thing to buy *is* compact discs.

But compare:

Compact discs *are* my favourite thing to buy.

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# *Pronoun Agreement*

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[Pronouns](#) **agree** in gender and number. This rule is not difficult to remember if you are writing about individual people or inanimate objects (where *it* suffices for everything). However, collective pronouns present more of a problem. Indefinite words such as *anyone, anything, someone, everybody* and *no one* take singular pronouns. Pronouns are also an issue when using gender-specific language.

The **antecedent** is the [noun](#) to which the pronoun refers. Make sure that it is clear what the antecedent of a pronoun is; otherwise, confusion and ambiguity will prevail. Also, make sure that you are referring to the correct noun. For example, in the following sentence the pronoun *their* refers to the noun *people* and not to *one*:

You are one of those *people* who like to keep *their* skeletons in the closet.

In this next sentence, however, the pronoun *his* refers to *one* and not to *members*:

I am the only *one* of the Lodge members who never wears *his* fez.

Be aware of the *case* of the pronoun. (For a discussion of case, see the section on grammar, 1.5.) If it is acting as the subject of a verb, use the subjective form:

It was *she.*

*She* is the [subjective completion](#) of "it was." Many people would automatically write "It was her," but the verb *to be* takes the same case after as before.

If the pronoun is acting as an object, use the objective form, even if the first person is involved:

Josh was angry with*him* and *me*.

Many writers believe it is improper to write "him and me," but this is only true in the subjective case. It is not correct to write this:

Ken and me went to the ballgame,

But it is also incorrect to write

The rain soaked Ken and I,

or

They sent the invitation to Ken and I.

Use *I*in the [subjective case](#) and *me* in the [objective case,](#) no matter what other pronouns are found in the sentence. More information is available in the discussion of [agreement](#) as a grammatical issue.

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# *The Need for Sentence Variation*

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It is difficult to read an essay made up entirely of simple subject-verb sentences: "The dog is barking. Jim kicks the dog. The dog bites Jim." While short sentences can be effective for emphasis ("The Eagle has landed"), they need to be surrounded by different kinds of sentences for contrast.

Simple sentences are the main stylistic feature of children's readers like *Fun With Dick and Jane,* so a paper full of them will sound as if it was written for youngsters. If your essay has any claim to sophistication whatsoever, it will feature sentences of varied length and complexity.

If you find that your essay is composed of choppy little sentences, try to connect some of them into compound or complex sentences.

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http://web.uvic.ca/wguide/Pages/SentCommProbs.html