Professor Rodgers
What Is Writing: A Brief Introduction to Writing as an Act of Communication
DRAFT

Understanding Sentences in Standard Written English (SWE)

Although there are few things considered more fundamental to "good" college and professional writing than "writing" "complete" sentences, the fact of the matter is that there are several different ways of defining what a sentence is. To make matters worse, there are many different--and not always standardized--ways of describing incomplete, or "non-sentences" in SWE. This is not at all surprising since writing complete sentences, or the achievement of what is sometimes called "sentence integrity," plays such a large role in what is the often over-simplified and actually highly complex phenomenon of error in college writing.

However, once you have agreed that there are really only two categories for describing words grouped together and separated by punctuation--sentences and non-sentences--and decided on a method for defining what a sentence is, a sentence can be defined fairly simply. **A sentence in Standard Written English (SWE) is an independent clause that may, or may not, relate to one or more independent or dependent clauses.** However much of a mouthful this may seem, it actually helps to simplify matters considerably since sentences can then be defined not in terms of what they are not, i.e., incomplete sentences of various varieties, but in terms of what they are, i.e., clauses and their relations. What is more, there are only two types of clauses: **independent clauses** and **dependent clauses**. Understanding the definitions and functions of each of these clause types will enable you to write many sentences, some of which will be short, some of which will be long, many of which will be quite original and unique, and all of which will be complete, simply by virtue of the fact that they are sentences and not non-sentences according to the definition of a sentence in SWE.

An independent clause IS a sentence; a dependent clause is NOT a sentence. Independent clauses generally consist of a subject phrase, a verb phrase, and an object phrase. They begin with a capital letter and end with one of three possible punctuation marks: a period, a question mark, or an exclamation point. While independent clauses can at times have only a subject phrase and a verb phrase, e.g., "I am.", unless you are writing an imperative sentence, e.g., "Go!", every independent clause--and therefore every sentence--will have a subject phrase and a verb phrase. Furthermore, unless you are asking a question, e.g., "Who is that?", or "Which one?", this subject phrase will include a noun or a definite pronoun and will NOT begin with a relative pronoun.

Are you able to easily differentiate between independent and dependent clauses? Are you able to easily identify the subject phrase, verb phrase, and object phrase in each independent clause? Are you able to easily and readily identify conjunctions and relative pronouns? You need to be able to do these things in order to consistently ensure that you are writing sentences and not non-sentences in SWE.

What is particularly interesting and unique about sentences in SWE is that while they can be defined as independent clauses--e.g., "I love cats and dogs."--they can also be defined as a combination of independent and dependent clauses. While there are therefore many different varieties and kinds of sentences, all of these generally fall into one of three categories: **simple sentences**, **compound sentences**, and **complex sentences**,. Having the ability to readily recognize these three types of sentences in your writing is an important step in ensuring that, as you edit and proofread your work, the sentences you have intended to be sentences are sentences. Here is one example of a simple sentence: "I love cats and dogs." Here is one example of a compound sentence: "I love cats and dogs, but I am allergic to them." Here is one example of a complex sentence: "Because they love me, dogs and cats are the animals I most love." [Note: a complex-compound sentence is the combination of multiple independent clauses, at least one of which has a dependent clause. Here is one example: "A disappointment, to be sure, but it reminds us that the sentence itself is a man-made object, not the one we wanted of course, but still a construction of man, a structure to be treasured for its weakness, as opposed to the strength of stones." (Barthelme, "The Sentence")

One thing that is particularly exciting about sentences is that their length is--theoretically--infinite. Assuming you have assembled your independent and dependent clauses in a manner that adheres to the guidelines for SWE usage, your sentence could go on for pages! What is more, such a sentence would not be a "run-on"! For, run-ons are not, as some people believe, sentences that are merely too long. Rather, regardless of their length (and usually as a result of it), they are NOT sentences! Whereas long non-sentences are often referred to as run-ons, short non-sentences are often referred to as "sentence fragments," and you should also avoid including these in your college and professional writing unless you do so intentionally for stylistic or rhetorical effect.

While opinions vary as to the percentage of sentences versus non-sentences that are used in everyday speech, some researchers report that the majority of spoken utterances are sentences, even according to the guidelines of SWE. Furthermore, all spoken utterances that are understood by a listener are, at least in part, grammatically correct, according to the grammar of a given dialect. **If they were not, at least to some extent, grammatically correct, the listener would not be able to understand what the speaker was saying.** That said, although there is significant overlap between the grammar and usage guidelines of SWE and other dialects, SWE is a specific dialect with its own specific rules, some of which you will not find in any other dialect. As a result, while some of these rules will be familiar to native English speakers, there are others that will need to be studied and learned.

Crucial to understanding sentences and achieving adherence to SWE guidelines in your writing is the use of SWE punctuation. Interestingly, from a linguistic perspective, punctuation is not part of the grammar of a language. However, it is often classified as a part of the grammar of a language by teachers of writing (see "What Is Grammar?" for a fuller discussion of grammar and its definitions). Furthermore, punctuation is also one of the major differences between written and spoken communication. In speaking, unless someone is being very annoying and indicating punctuation marks by actually naming them in words or signing them with gestures, punctuation can only be implied through pauses of varying lengths; in writing, punctuation is graphic and explicit. Furthermore, in writing, the writer is entirely responsible for the punctuation inserted into a sentence, and this punctuation plays an important role in the reader's ability to understand and de-code a sentence. The punctuation in a written sentence, in fact, directs and guides the reader's interpretation of a sentence. While we all know that periods end a sentence and that they mean something, most of us do not acknowledge that commas are also meaningful marks of punctuation. This results, at least in part, from the fact that the rules for correct SWE comma usage are pretty unwieldy (there are technically sixteen? rules for correct comma usage). However, college students generally need to know only four of these. You can find these four rules (and a few more) here. It is imperative that you use commas according to their rules for usage. Use commas as intentionally and as cautiously as you would use a period and do not over-use them. Always remember: Punctuation is not decoration (in SWE).

The only way to ensure that all of the sentences in a piece of writing are sentences in SWE is through thorough editing and proofreading processes for each draft. See "What Is Revision?" for guidelines and worksheets related to the revision process. Even the most experienced writers will at times write non-sentences in a draft. Of course, the more you read and write, the less likely you are to write non-sentences and the quicker you will become at identifying them as non-sentences when you do write them.

Understanding the definitions and functions of specific parts of speech (see "10 Things You Need To Know About Writing" and "How To Play Games With Words") and being able to readily identify these in your writing is the first step in making sure that your sentences are sentences according to SWE guidelines. Having an awareness of what are and are not sentences in SWE and what these look and sound like both in speaking and in writing is another useful tool. With such an awareness, you may quickly notice that one of the major differences between speaking and writing is how clauses function. In speaking, clauses can be placed in many positions in a sentence and the sentence will still make sense to the listener. This is not the case in SWE. In SWE, clauses need to be carefully integrated into a sentence to preserve the integrity of the sentence both from a logical and syntactical perspective.

Furthermore, in SWE, sentences will almost NEVER begin with a relative pronoun or a conjunction. This means that you will almost NEVER begin a simple or compound sentence with the words "which" or "that." If you see one of those words, or the word "of" at the

beginning of a simple or compound sentence, chances are, your sentence may not be a sentence according to the guidelines of SWE.

Although practice in reading, writing, and revision is the best way to avoid having non-sentences in your writing, one other way to make sure that you are writing sentences is to read your draft aloud, either to yourself or, preferably to another person. You will most likely **hear** problems with a non-sentence before you **see** problems in a non-sentence.

Acitivities

After reading this introduction, what specific questions do you have about sentences in Standard Written English (SWE) that you would like to have answered? Please write three questions about some specific aspect of the SWE sentence. For instance, "what is a run-on?" "What is the difference between a period and a comma?" "What is wrong with this sentence: 'The is dog cat eating the.'" "If it is possible to start a SWE sentence with the word 'Because,' why did my high school English teacher tell me NEVER to do that?" "What is a sentence fragment, and how can I revise these in my writing?" Be creative! Ask anything and everything you've ever wanted to know about SWE sentences, and their functions/malfunctions.

Additional Reading

"Where Do Sentences Come From?" by Verlyn Klinkenborg (Although this article does not answer the question posed in the title, it offers some insight into one writer's process turning thoughts into sentences.)

http://college.cengage.com/english/trimmer/writing/14e/students/hgu/index.html