

What is a sentence?

A sentence is a series of words expressing one or more ideas. Each idea in a sentence is expressed by a **clause**.

- *The boy threw the ball.*
- *The boy threw the ball, and his friend caught it.*
- *The boy who was wearing the green shirt threw the ball.*

What is a clause?

A clause is a single idea, expressed by at least two elements: the **subject** and the **verb**. Sometimes there is a third element, the **complement**.

- The **subject** is the actor performing the action.
- The **verb** is the action being performed.
- The **complement** is the target of the action.

Subject
The boy

Verb
threw

Complement
the ball.

Word groups

It is helpful to think of the elements of a clause as **word groups**.

- The **subject group** is always a noun and the words modifying that noun, or a group of words acting as a noun.
- The **verb group** is always one or more verbs and the words modifying them.
- The **complement group** can be one of two things:
 - a noun and its modifiers, or a group of words acting as a noun
 - an adjective and its modifiers, or a group of words acting as an adjective

Subject group

The boy
The tall boy
Whoever had the ball
The ball
Throwing a heavy ball

Verb group

threw
quickly threw
should have thrown
was really
can be

Complement group

the ball.
the orange ball.
it.
quite heavy.
difficult.

Expanding the clause

A simple clause can be expanded to provide more detailed information.

This is accomplished by adding **adjectives** and **adverbs** to the word groups in the clause.

Adjectives and adverbs are usually kept **immediately beside** what they describe.

Adjectives are words that describe nouns.

- The tall boy threw the orange ball.
- The young, clumsy boy dropped the wet ball.
- The first boy threw the ball to the second boy.

Many smaller **word groups** can act as adjectives, even if they do not contain an adjective.

- The boy with the long hair threw the ball.
- The boys didn't want to play with a ball covered in mud.
- When the other kids chased him, the boy had a good reason to throw the ball.

Adverbs are words that describe verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs.

- The boy quickly threw the ball.
- The ball was very heavy.
- The boy could run extremely quickly.

Many smaller **word groups** can act as adverbs, even if they do not contain an adverb.

- The boy threw the ball with great energy.
- The boy yelled to scare away the skunk.
- The boy laughed with his friends.

Adjectives and adverbs **can often be moved around within the clause**, especially if they are word groups.

The earlier words in a sentence receive the most emphasis - they have a greater impression on the reader.

- Nobody wanted to play baseball at first.
- At first, nobody wanted to play baseball.
- It was the boy's birthday yesterday.
- Yesterday, it was the boy's birthday.
- Covered in bruises, the boy came back from goalie practice.
- The boy came back from the goalie practice covered in bruises.
- However, he was very happy with how well he'd done.
- He was very happy, however, with how well he'd done.

Example:

Simple clause:

With single-word adjectives:

With single word adverb:

With adverb group:

Moved around within the clause:

The boy threw the ball.

The **tall** boy threw the **orange** ball.

The tall boy **suddenly** threw the orange ball.

The tall boy suddenly threw the orange ball **with a loud yell**.

Suddenly, with a loud yell, the tall boy threw the orange ball.

Using connecting words effectively

Connecting words are used to express the relationship between word groups or clauses.

Changing a connecting word can alter the entire meaning of a sentence.

To use connecting words effectively, you must choose the word that expresses the correct relationship.

- *The boy caught the ball, **and** the game was over.*
 - Expresses addition and reinforcement of ideas
 - Implies that the boy catching the ball is what finished the game.
- *The boy caught the ball, **but** the game was over.*
 - Expresses an opposition between ideas
 - Implies that the boy caught the ball when it was too late and the game was already over.
- *The boy caught the ball **because** the game was over.*
 - Expresses cause and effect
 - The end of the game is the reason that the boy caught the ball
- *The boy caught the ball **even though** the game was over.*
 - Expresses an opposition between ideas
 - The boy didn't need to catch the ball at that point in time, but he did it anyways.

Many connecting words can have other functions in a sentence.

A word's meaning always depends on its context.

- *I know **that** you bought me a pencil today.*
 - "That" is a connecting word that introduces a clause acting as a noun.
- *I broke **that** pencil you gave me yesterday.*
 - "That" is a determiner that helps define "pencil" for the reader.
- *You bought a pencil **for** me.*
 - "For" is a preposition that tells the reader who the pencil was given to.
- *You bought me a pencil, **for** I had broken my last one.*
 - "For" is a conjunction that connects two simple sentences.
 - The second clause is the cause of the first one

Common sentence errors

Understanding sentence structure helps to avoid many of the most common errors in the English language.

Sentence fragments

A clause becomes a sentence fragment if it has a connecting word but it is not actually connected to another clause.

- *Whenever the boy threw the ball. The dog would bring it back.*
- *His father said not to. But the boy threw the ball.*
- *The dog barked. And the boy threw the ball.*

To complete the sentence, either remove the connecting word or add another clause, often by changing punctuation.

- *The boy threw the ball.*
- *Whenever the boy threw the ball, **the dog would bring it back.***
- ***His father said not to,** but the boy threw the ball.*
- ***The dog barked,** and the boy threw the ball.*

Comma splices and run-on sentences

These occur when clauses are joined together incorrectly through misuse of punctuation or connecting words.

- *The boy threw the ball, however he wasn't fast enough.*
- *The boy threw the ball, he wasn't fast enough.*
- *The boy threw the ball he wasn't fast enough.*

To correct these errors, there are three options:

- use a semicolon
 - use a conjunction and comma
 - split the clauses into separate sentences.
- *The boy threw the ball; however, he wasn't fast enough.*
 - *The boy threw the ball, **but** he wasn't fast enough.*
 - *The boy threw the ball. **He** wasn't fast enough.*

Misplaced modifiers

Adjectives or adverbs - single words or groups - always describe the closest element of the clause.

If a modifier group is closer to the wrong element, it can be awkward, confusing, or even hilarious.

- ***Vicious and dangerous,** the woods were full of bears.*
 - Here, "the woods" seem to be vicious and dangerous, which does not make much sense.
- *He cautioned them against yelling **quietly,** since it could cause an avalanche.*
 - "Quietly" seems to modify "yelling," which is contradictory.

To correct these errors, move the modifiers so that they are closest to the element they should modify.

- *The woods were full of bears, **vicious and dangerous.***
- *He **quietly** cautioned them against yelling, since it could cause an avalanche.*

Pronoun reference

Pronouns must clearly refer to another previous noun, especially if they are acting as a substitute for that noun.

There are two common ways that a pronoun can become unclear.

- The noun it refers to is ambiguous.
 - *The students were graded based on exams and essays, and **they** were very difficult.*
 - *Jared told Marc that **he** wasn't invited.*
- The noun it refers to is far away.
 - *I found an old suit in the attic yesterday **that** used to belong to my grandfather.*

To clarify these pronouns, rearrange the sentence or use a full noun instead of a pronoun.

- *The students were graded based on exams and essays, and **the exams** were very difficult.*
- *I found an old suit **that used to belong to my grandfather** in the attic yesterday.*
- *Jared told Marc that **Marc** wasn't invited.*

Interrogative sentences

The structure of a sentence that asks a question is somewhat different from the standard or declarative sentence.

The key to interrogative sentences is **auxiliary verbs**, which are sometimes part of the verb group:

be, have, do, will, shall, would, should, can, could, may, might, must, ought

To form a **simple yes or no question**,

- move the auxiliary verb to the start of the sentence
- if there is no auxiliary verb, insert *do* at the start of the sentence
- make sure the auxiliary verb agrees with the subject
- add a question mark to the end of the sentence.

- *He is leaving.*
- *Is he leaving?*
- *I want to learn.*
- *Do I want to learn?*
- *Does he want to learn?*

It is also possible to replace *be, have, or do* with one of the other auxiliary verbs in order to change what the question asks.

- *Is he leaving?*
- *Should he leave?*
- *Must he leave?*
- *Do I want to learn?*
- *Will I want to learn?*

These auxiliary verbs are **modal** - that is, they talk about things that are possible, suggested, likely, necessary, or yet to happen.

To **expand a question**, add a question word - *who, what, which, where, when, why, how*

It is also possible to add a question phrase - a word group that contains a question word

- *When is he leaving?*
- *What do I want to learn?*
- *How do I want to learn this song?*
- *In what key do I want to learn this song?*

These questions require more descriptive or explanatory answers, and cannot be answered with just a "yes" or "no."

References

For more detailed and exhaustive explanations of sentence grammar, refer to a reputable handbook.

Fowler, Ramsey H., Jane E. Aaron and Murray McArthur. *The Little, Brown Handbook*. 4th Canadian edition. Toronto: Pearson, 2005.

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