

Sentences:

Simple, Compound, and Complex

A common weakness in writing is the lack of varied sentences. Becoming aware of three general types of sentences--simple, compound, and complex--can help you vary the sentences in your writing.

The most effective writing uses a variety of the sentence types explained below.

1. Simple Sentences

A **simple sentence** has the most basic elements that make it a sentence: a subject, a verb, and a completed thought.

Examples of **simple sentences** include the following:

1. Joe waited for the train.
"Joe" = subject, "waited" = verb
2. The train was late.
"The train" = subject, "was" = verb
3. Mary and Samantha took the bus.
"Mary and Samantha" = compound subject, "took" = verb
4. I looked for Mary and Samantha at the bus station.
"I" = subject, "looked" = verb
5. Mary and Samantha arrived at the bus station early but waited until noon for the bus.
"Mary and Samantha" = compound subject, "arrived" and "waited" = compound verb

The use of compound subjects, compound verbs, prepositional phrases (such as "at the bus station"), and other elements help lengthen simple sentences, but simple sentences often are short. The use of too many simple sentences can make writing "choppy" and can prevent the writing from flowing smoothly.

A simple sentence can also be referred to as an **independent clause**. It is referred to as "independent" because, while it might be part of a compound or complex sentence, it can also stand by itself as a complete sentence.

2. Compound Sentences

A **compound sentence** refers to a sentence made up of two independent clauses (or complete sentences) connected to one another with a **coordinating conjunction**. Coordinating conjunctions are easy to remember if you think of the words "FAN BOYS":

- **F**or
- **A**nd
- **N**or
- **B**ut
- **O**r
- **Y**et
- **S**o

Examples of **compound sentences** include the following:

1. Joe waited for the train, **but** the train was late.
2. I looked for Mary and Samantha at the bus station, **but** they arrived at the station before noon and left on the bus before I arrived.
3. Mary and Samantha arrived at the bus station before noon, **and** they left on the bus before I arrived.
4. Mary and Samantha left on the bus before I arrived, **so** I did not see them at the bus station.

Coordinating conjunctions are useful for connecting sentences, but compound sentences often are overused. While coordinating conjunctions can indicate some type of relationship between the two independent clauses in the sentence, they sometimes do not indicate much of a relationship. The word "and," for example, only adds one independent clause to another, without indicating how the two parts of a sentence are logically related. Too many compound sentences that use "and" can weaken writing.

3. Complex Sentences

A **complex sentence** is made up of an independent clause and one or more **dependent clauses** connected to it. A dependent clause is similar to an independent clause, or complete sentence, but it lacks one of the elements that would make it a complete sentence.

Examples of **dependent clauses** include the following:

- because Mary and Samantha arrived at the bus station before noon
- while he waited at the train station
- after they left on the bus

Dependent clauses such as those above **cannot** stand alone as a sentence, but they can be added to an independent clause to form a complex sentence.

Dependent clauses begin with **subordinating conjunctions**. Below are some of the most common subordinating conjunctions:

- after
- although
- as
- because
- before
- even though
- if
- since
- though
- unless
- until
- when
- whenever
- whereas
- wherever
- while

A complex sentence joins an independent clause with one or more dependent clauses.

The dependent clauses can go first in the sentence, followed by the independent clause, as in the following:

1. Because Mary and Samantha arrived at the bus station before noon, I did not see them at the station.
2. While he waited at the train station, Joe realized that the train was late.
3. After they left on the bus, Mary and Samantha realized that Joe was waiting at the train station.