

Sentence structure-related questions are among the most common you'll encounter on the SAT writing and language section. To properly answer these questions, you'll need to know what a complete sentence looks like and how to recognize and fix fragments in run-ons.

So, what's a **complete sentence**? Simply put, it's a sentence that has, at the very least, a subject and a verb conjugated to "agree" with the subject:

The man (subject) with the silly hat loves (verb) to dance.

Fragments

A complete sentence is also known as an **independent clause**, meaning that the clause can stand on its own as a full sentence. Conversely, a **sentence fragment** is a group of words that cannot stand on its own as a full sentence, meaning that it relies, or depends on, other sentence elements to make it complete.

Take a look at a modified version of the sentence above:

The man with the silly hat.

Is it still a complete sentence? No, it's a fragment because it has a subject but does not have a verb. The sentence probably sounds and feels like a fragment, too. What about the man with the silly hat? What does or did he do? The sentence is incomplete because it doesn't supply that information.

Now, the fragment above is pretty easy to identify as a fragment, mostly because it's pretty short. Longer, more complex dependent clauses can be trickier. Consider this phrase:

Before the man with the silly hat went home.

Is it a complete sentence? It has a subject--"man." And it appears to have a verb--"went." So, is this an independent clause? No, because the first word of the clause, "Before," makes this phrase what's called a subordinate, or dependent clause. It requires a main clause to make the sentence complete:

Before the man with the silly hat went home, he stopped at the market to buy groceries.

Once you add the main clause, "he stopped at the market to buy groceries," the sentence is complete. To recognize subordinate clauses, look out for words like "Before," which is known as a **subordinating conjunction**. Other, similar words include after, although, as, as if, because, before, ever since, if, in order, just as, since, so that, though, unless, until, when, whenever, where, whether, whereas, whichever, and while.

Run-ons

A run-on sentence is when two complete, or independent, sentences are joined together without proper punctuation. There are three main types: commas splices, fused sentences, and sentences joined by a conjunctive adverb and commas (instead of a semicolon and a comma).

Comma Splice

This common run-on error happens when you join two complete sentences together the just a commas. Take a look at this sentence:

He finished the race in first place, he beat his nearest competitor by more than 30 seconds.

The problem here is that the clause on either side of the comma is a independent clause. When that's the case, you have a comma splice. There are a few ways to fix a comma splice:

1. **Use a period to create two complete sentences:** "He finished the race in first place. He beat his nearest competitor by more than 30 seconds."
2. **Use a semicolon instead of a comma:** "He finished the race in first place; he beat his nearest competitor by more than 30 seconds."
3. **Use a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) after the comma:** "He finished the race in first place, and he beat his nearest competitor by more than 30 seconds."

Fused Sentence

A fused sentence occurs when you mush two sentences together without any punctuation:

He finished the race in first place he beat his nearest competitor by more than 30 seconds.

Fixing a fused sentence is the same as fixing a comma splice: use a period to create two complete sentences; place a semicolon before the second sentence begins; or put a comma at the end of the first sentence, followed by a coordinating conjunction.

Main Takeaway

At heart, a sentence is a simple thing. No matter how long it is or how many subordinate clauses or other parts it has, a sentence is simply a group of words that includes a subject and a verb conjugated to agree with that subject. When dealing with SAT questions that include fragments or run-on sentences, always look for the subject and corresponding verb. If either the subject or verb is missing, it's a fragment.

