

FINDING AND FIXING FRAGMENTS

A **fragment** is a group of words that does not function as a complete sentence and so cannot stand alone. It cannot begin with a capital letter and end with a period. You can't tell whether or not a phrase is a sentence by its length, as you can see from the following examples:

Complete Sentence: I am.
Fragment: The baby who hit her head, crawling into the room.

So how can you tell if a group of words is a fragment or not?

Look for a Main Verb

The main verb is the action of doing, or being, or having that is being described. If a group of words does not have a main verb, it's a fragment.

I.S.U. **graduated** several hundred students last summer.
Individual freedom and personal responsibility **are** important values for Americans.
I **am**.
Unlike Kathy and me, Heather **has** two tests on Thursday.
Hand me that hammer.

Make sure that any word that looks like a verb really is acting as a verb, and not as a describer or noun. These words look as if they include a main verb, but they really don't:

Crawling into the room.

Why not? Because to be the main verb of a sentence, **-ing** verb forms like **crawling** need to be matched with a "be" verb like "is" or "were."

She **is crawling** into the room.
They **were crawling** into the room.

By itself, **crawling** can only work as part of a description,

Crawling into the room, she hit her head on the playpen.

(What's the main thing happening in this sentence? She **hit** her head. The word **crawling** is just describing her, like an adjective. It would be just as easy to say, "Excited and happy, she hit her head on the playpen.")

or part of a noun,

Crawling into the room was her big goal.

(Here, crawling is an abstract thing--the subject of the verb **was**). Either way, the phrase **crawling into the room** does not include a main verb, so it's a fragment.

Phrases containing **to-** verbs like **to walk** and **to argue** often present the same kinds of problems.

Look for a Subject

The subject is the person, place, thing, or idea that is “doing” the main verb of the sentence. It may be a pronoun like **I** or **he**. If a group of words does not have a subject, it’s a fragment --unless the sentence is a request or command, in which case the subject **you** is understood:

I.S.U. graduated several hundred students last summer.

Individual freedom and personal responsibility are important values for Americans.

I am.

Unlike me, **Heather** has two tests on Thursday.

[You] Hand me that hammer.

Look for Words that Create Fragments

If a word or expression like one of these appears **before either** the subject or verb in the words in front of you, that word turns them into a fragment:

after	before	once	unless	which
although	even though	since	until	while
as	if	so that	when	who
as long as	how	than	where	whoever
because	now that	that	whether	why

(fragment) I.S.U., **which** graduated several hundred students last summer,

(fragment) **As long as** individual freedom and personal responsibility are important values for Americans,

(fragment) **Although** I am,

(fragment) Unlike me, Heather, **who** has two tests on Thursday,

(fragment) **Before you** hand me that hammer,

Notice that “however,” “moreover,” and “nevertheless” aren’t on this list; each of these words can appear before the subject or verb of your sentence without creating a fragment.

(full sentence) Moreover, I didn’t believe the stranger’s instructions.

How to Fix a Fragment

There are basically two ways to fix a fragment. The first, and most common, is to use a comma to attach it to the words before or after it--which is probably the way you would have spoken the words in the first place. Usually those words are themselves a full sentence:

Before you hand me that hammer, **could you pass me the nails?**

As long as individual freedom and personal responsibility are important values for Americans, **there will be resistance to a national health care plan.**

She’s not going to the fair, although I am.

But if your fragment already contains a subject, the words you connect it to just need a verb:

Unlike me, Heather, who has two tests on Thursday, **has taken the week off work.**

I.S.U., which graduated several hundred students last summer, **is in Pocatello.**

The second way is to rewrite it entirely, making sure your new sentence has a subject, a main verb, and no fragment-creating words in front of either.

I.S.U. graduated several hundred students last summer.
Individual freedom and personal responsibility are important values for Americans.
I am.
Unlike me, Heather, has two tests on Thursday.
Hand me that hammer.

Practice

Look for a subject (AS”), a main verb (AV”), and any word that would create a fragment (AF”) in each of the following sentences. Are the words a fragment? How could you revise them?

1. Casey and I trapped the tiny bird.
2. The team that won the game, shouting loudly.
3. The book which she lent to the new student in the class.
4. Because they didn’t know any better.
5. Luckily, she was famous for her clear vision and quick reflexes.
6. Bitter about having been left behind and exhausted from walking home.
7. Under the tree sat a yellow dog.
8. To tell the absolute truth.
9. Inside the crypt, hiding in a shadowy corner.
10. Running as fast as she could to the store.

Answers

1. S: Casey and I. V : trapped. Not a fragment.
2. S: baby. V: none. F: “that.” (“Won” is part of a description because it follows “that,” and “shouting” would need “was” in front of it to be a main verb.) Fragment. Revision: “The team that won the game, shouting loudly, piled into the bus.”
3. S: the book. No verb. F: “which” (“Lent” is part of a description because it follows “which.”) Fragment. Revision: She lent the book to the new student in the class.”
4. S: they. V: didn’t know. F: “because.” Fragment. Revision: “Because they didn’t know any better, they left the car running.”
5. S: She. V: was famous. Not a fragment.
6. S: none. No verb. Fragment. Revision: “He was bitter about having been left behind and exhausted from walking home.”
7. S: dog. V: sat. (Same as “a yellow dog sat under the tree.”) Not a fragment.
8. S: none. No verb. Fragment. Revision: “To tell the absolute truth, I disagree.”
9. S: none. No verb. Fragment. Revision: “Inside the crypt, hiding in a shadowy corner, he wept.”
10. S: none. No verb. Fragment. Possible revisions: “She was running as fast as she could to the store,” or “Running as fast as she could to the store, she tripped over the curb.”