



Sentences

What is a sentence?

It is essential that a sentence (in the languages we teach in this school) starts with a capital letter and ends with a full-stop, a question mark, or an exclamation mark. But this is not enough. A sentence must:

- Have a subject (the thing that does the action)
- Have a verb (the action)
- Contain a complete thought (in other words, it can stand alone and still have meaning).

A sentence can be as long or short as we wish it to be, but the longer it gets, the harder it is to make sure it is actually a sentence, so we ought to be careful.

- ⇒ Margarita talks.
- ⇒ Margarita talks in class all the time.
- ⇒ Having not been taught early on about the proper way to conduct herself in a classroom setting, nor been corrected in her behaviour later on, nowadays Margarita talks in class all the time, thereby making it impossible for her classmates to focus or indeed learn anything.

What is not a sentence?

1. A fragment

A fragment is an incomplete sentence. It lacks either a subject, or a noun, or a complete meaning.

Native Spanish speakers sometimes **forget to put a subject** in their English (and French, and possibly other) sentences because that is not always necessary in Spanish. It actually happens much more in French, but even in English, sometimes they'd say, "Is that I need to go to the bathroom."

Very rarely, but still possible – younger students **forget to use a verb** (or use incorrect conjugations).

Most commonly, the problem with sentence fragments is that they **do not express a complete** thought, in other words, they are actually dependent clauses. With our friend Margarita above, we could have the following situation.

- ⇒ Because she is very lively.
- ⇒ When she is bored with the class activity and wants to gossip.

Both "sentences" have subjects and verbs, but they do not express complete meanings – we don't know what the "because" is explaining and we don't know what happens "when" she is bored. Make sure your students think about logic when writing or speaking their sentences.

How do we correct this? Quite often you just have to link the fragment to another sentence. Logic helps.

- ⇒ Because she is very lively, Margarita talks in class.
- ⇒ When she is bored with the class activity and wants to gossip, Margarita talks in class.



Here are some subordinating conjunction for which we have to look out because they indicate dependent clauses. When you see a dependent clause, make sure it is dependent on something within the same sentence.

- **Cause / Effect:** because, since, so that, which is why
- **Comparison / Contrast:** although, even though, though, whereas, while, as... as....
- **Place & Manner:** how, where, wherever
- **Possibility / Conditions:** if, whether, unless
- **Relation:** that, which, who
- **Time:** after, as, before, since, when, whenever, while, until

2. A run-on

A fragment is an incomplete sentence, while a run-on is, in some ways, an overcomplete sentence. More specifically, a run-on is two or more sentences joined together without a proper connection between them. For example:

⇒ Margarita talks in class all the time she is not paying attention.

Those are really two sentences. We can correct this by simply inserting a full-stop:

⇒ Margarita talks in class all the time. She is not paying attention.

This is, however, not very elegant. We might want to join the two sentences properly in various ways, depending on what we want to say. For example:

⇒ Margarita talks in class all the time because she is not paying attention.

⇒ Margarita talks in class (all the time) whenever she is not paying attention.

⇒ Margarita talks in class all the time and, as a result, she is never paying attention.

Just adding a comma doesn't do anything other than create another mistake, known as the comma splice.

⇒ Margarita talks in class all the time, she is not paying attention. → not a sentence.

There are of course many other things to pay attention to in sentences, including verb/noun agreement, parallel structures, clarity of referent/pronoun, etc. etc., about which you can look at the sources below, other sources, or just ask me or an English teacher.

Resources:

<http://faculty.washington.edu/ezent/imsc.htm>

<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/fragments-and-run-ons/>

(I have used the second site to organise much of the information above. However, this link has much more detail than what I have provided here, so make sure you take a look.)



Paragraphs

What is a paragraph?

A paragraph is a group of sentences (or a single sentence) that supports one single main idea. There is no prescribed length of a paragraph – what is important is that it is cohesive and that it forms a self-contained unit, usually within a larger text. A paragraph would generally have an introduction (where its main idea is announced), a development (containing examples and arguments that support the main idea), and a conclusion (which ties everything together and moves the text toward the next paragraph).

What is not a paragraph?

A few sentences bunched together do not a paragraph make. Common mistakes in “paragraphs” are:

⇒ lack of coherence/logic – if you can re-arrange the sentences and nothing changes in the “sense” of the “paragraph” than this is not a (strong) paragraph

⇒ multiple ideas – perhaps the sentences are well linked together, but there are actually multiple ideas within the paragraph. If that happens, then the paragraph needs to be split in two (or more).

How to write a paragraph?

1. **Beginning** – what is the main idea of this paragraph? What am I arguing in this paragraph? Once you decide on this you can write your **topic sentence**. ⇒ A topic sentence tells your reader about, well, the topic of the paragraph. It enunciates the controlling idea of the paragraph. It helps support the main idea of the whole essay.
⇒ A topic sentence should not necessarily be the first sentence of the paragraph, but it is advisable that it be toward the beginning. It might be preceded, for example, by a sentence linking the paragraph to the previous one.

2. **Argumentations** – how am I going to support this main idea? How am I going to convince my readers that the argument I am making is correct or worthwhile considering?
⇒ You might need to explain a bit the significance of the topic sentence.
⇒ You surely will need to give an example (or a few). This example will illustrate what you are talking about
⇒ You will need to explain that example. You want to make sure that your readers are not left wondering why you’re talking about this specific example – it needs to link to the topic statement.

3. **Conclusion** – I’ve made my point. So what? You want to make sure that all that you’ve “proven” in your paragraph leads us somewhere □ You might want to consider tying loose ends and summarizing the idea of the paragraph. However, this summary shouldn’t be just a re-hashing of what was said before – it should move us forward.
⇒ You might want to consider tying loose ends and summarizing the idea of the paragraph. However, this summary shouldn’t be just a re-hashing of what was said before – it should move us forward.
⇒ You need to think how this paragraph will lead us to the next one.



What else should I think about when writing a paragraph?

1. Coherence

- ⇒ Everything in a paragraph needs to relate to the main idea/topic sentence.
- ⇒ There needs to be syntactical and grammatical coherence. Pay, for example, attention to (unnecessary) switches in tense.
- ⇒ It helps to have key words or their synonyms repeated throughout the paragraph
- ⇒ Every sentence should follow from the previous one. Transition words (however, moreover, on the other hand, etc.) help both in thinking about the links and highlighting them to the readers.

2. Relation to the thesis.

- ⇒ It is possible that a paragraph is perfectly well-constructed, yet a reader actually has no idea why it is in the essay/paper to begin with. Every paragraph needs to be necessary for the development of the idea of the paper.

3. Unity

- ⇒ Is there a *single* idea in the paragraph? If not, you should consider breaking the paragraph in two or more paragraphs.

Exercise: What do you think about this paragraph?

Piranhas rarely feed on large animals; they eat smaller fish and aquatic plants. When confronted with humans, piranhas' first instinct is to flee, not attack. Their fear of humans makes sense. Far more piranhas are eaten by people than people are eaten by piranhas. A number of South American groups eat piranhas. They fry or grill the fish and then serve them with coconut milk or tucupi, a sauce made from fermented manioc juices.

Sources:

- <https://wts.indiana.edu/writing-guides/paragraphs-and-topic-sentences.html>
- <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/paragraphs/>