
AN OVERVIEW OF SENTENCE STRUCTURE

BASIC PRINCIPLE: Every clause is, in a sense, a miniature sentence. A simple sentence contains only a single clause, while a compound sentence, a complex sentence, or a compound-complex sentence contains at least two clauses.

THE SIMPLE SENTENCE

The most basic type of sentence is the **simple sentence**, which contains only one clause. A simple sentence can be as short as one word:

Run!

Usually, however, the sentence has a **subject** (what or whom the sentence is about) as well as a **predicate** (which relates something about the subject and always includes the verb). Both the subject and the predicate may have **modifiers** (word, phrase, or clause that adds information about a particular element of a sentence). All of the following are simple sentences, because each contains only one clause:

Melt!

Ice **melts**.

The ice **melts** quickly.

The ice on the river **melts** quickly under the warm March sun.

Lying exposed without its blanket of snow, the ice on the river **melts** quickly under the warm March sun.

As you can see, a simple sentence can be quite long—it is a mistake to think that you can tell a simple sentence from a compound sentence or a complex sentence simply by its length.

The most basic sentence structure is the simple sentence. It is the first kind which children learn to speak, and it remains by far the most common sentence in the spoken language of people of all ages. In written work, simple sentences can be very effective for grabbing a reader's attention or for summing up an argument, but you should to use them with care because too many simple sentences can make your writing sound choppy.

When you do use simple sentences, you should add transitional phrases to connect them to the surrounding sentences.

THE COMPOUND SENTENCE

A **compound sentence** consists of two or more independent clauses (a.k.a. simple sentences) joined by **coordinating conjunctions** like *and*, *but*, and *or*:

Simple: The U.S. is a rich country.

Simple: Still, it has many poor people.

Compound: The U.S. is a rich country, but still it has many poor people.

Compound sentences are very natural for English speakers—small children learn to use them early on to connect their ideas and to avoid pausing (and allowing someone to interrupt). For example:

Today at school Mr. Moore brought in his pet rabbit, and he showed it to the class, and I got to pet it, and Kate held it, and we colored pictures of it, and it ate part of my carrot at lunch, and . . .

A compound sentence is most effective when you use it to create a sense of balance or contrast between two (or more) equally-important pieces of information. For example:

Seattle has great coffee, but Portland has better microbrews.

SPECIAL CASES OF COMPOUND SENTENCES

There are two special types of compound sentences which you might want to note. First, rather than joining two simple sentences together, a coordinating conjunction sometimes joins two complex sentences, or one simple sentence and one complex sentence. In this case, the sentence is called a **compound-complex sentence**. For example:

The package arrived in the morning, but the courier left before I could check the contents.

The second special case involves punctuation. It is possible to join two originally separate sentences into a compound sentence using a semicolon instead of a coordinating conjunction:

Sir John A. Macdonald had a serious drinking problem; when sober, however, he could be a formidable foe in the House of Commons.

Usually, a **conjunctive adverb** like *however* or *consequently* will appear near the beginning of the second part, but it is not required:

The sun rises in the east; it sets in the west.

THE COMPLEX SENTENCE

A **complex sentence** contains one independent clause and at least one **dependent clause** (a clause that could not be a sentence by itself). Unlike a compound sentence, however, a complex sentence contains clauses which are *not* equal. Consider the following examples:

Simple: My friend invited me to a party. I do not want to go.

Compound: My friend invited me to a party, but I do not want to go.

Complex: Although my friend invited me to a party, I do not want to go.

In the first example, there are two separate simple sentences: "My friend invited me to a party" and "I do not want to go." The second example joins them together into a single sentence with the coordinating conjunction *but*, but both parts could still stand as independent sentences—they are entirely equal, and the reader cannot tell which is most important. In the third example, however, the sentence has changed quite a bit: the first clause, "Although my friend invited me to a party," has become incomplete, *i.e.* a dependent clause.

A complex sentence is very different from a simple sentence or a compound sentence because it makes clear which ideas are most important. When you write

My friend invited me to a party. I do not want to go.

or even

My friend invited me to a party, but I do not want to go.

the reader will have trouble knowing which piece of information is most important to you. When you write the subordinating conjunction *although* at the beginning of the first clause, however, you make it clear that the fact that your friend invited you is less important than, or **subordinate**, to the fact that you do not want to go.