

IDENTIFYING SENTENCE FRAGMENTS

Regis Writing Center

Textbooks refer to sentences as expressing complete thoughts or as having a complete subject and complete verb. While this seems simple, identifying what is complete can be difficult. For example, do the following qualify as sentences?

Dogs have been domesticated. Because all dogs originally had wolves as ancestors.

While both express complete thoughts and both have subjects and verbs, only the first is a complete sentence. Two tests can be used to determine whether a sentence fragment exists.

1. Embedding Sentences

In the first test for complete sentences, begin with the phrase “They refused to believe the idea that” and add your test sentence. For example,

They refused to believe the idea that dogs have been domesticated.

They refused to believe the idea that because dogs have been domesticated.

Obviously, the first sentence is fine but the second is not.

Complete Sentences

Try embedding the following by beginning with the phrase “They refused to believe the idea that”:

I was willing to go to work earlier if necessary.

That impeachment is certain is now obvious.

The stream meandered but eventually reached the ocean.

Dancers twist and shout.

Sentence Fragments

Now try embedding the following within the same phrase:

Dancers twisting and shouting.

In order to explain the concept more fully.

If you need further instructions.

Whatever is necessary to get the job done.

2. Tag Sentences

The second method to test for a complete sentence is to create “tag” sentences. Be aware that this method works best with simple declarative sentences. First, add the words “can’t they,” “shouldn’t we,” “won’t I,” etc., at the end of the test sentence to create a question. Next, place only the verb “can’t,” “won’t,” etc., at the beginning of the sentence to create a “yes-no” question. Using the above examples, the following tag sentences are formed:

Dogs have been domesticated.

1a). Dogs have been domesticated, haven’t they?

1b). Haven’t dogs been domesticated?

Because all dogs originally had wolves as ancestors.

2a). Because all dogs originally had wolves as ancestors, didn’t they?

2b). Didn’t because all dogs originally had wolves as ancestors?

Complete Sentences

Tag sentences can only be created when a complete sentence exists. For example, the following are complete sentences:

I was willing to go to work earlier if necessary.

- 3a). I was willing to go to work earlier if necessary, wasn't I?
- 3b). Wasn't I willing to go to work earlier if necessary?

The stream meandered but eventually reached the ocean.

- 5a). The stream meandered but eventually reached the ocean, didn't it?
- 5b). Didn't the stream meander but eventually reach the ocean? [Note: Because this is a compound sentence with two verbs, the past tense verbs "meandered" and "reached" have to be changed to present tense.]

Dancers twist and shout.

- 6a). Dancers twist and shout, don't they?
- 6b). Don't dancers twist and shout?

Sentence Fragments

When you try to create these tag sentence with the following fragments, problems arise in either the first or second tag sentences (or, occasionally, in both). If there is a problem in either tag sentence, a fragment usually exists.

Dancers twisting and shouting.

- 4a). Dancers twisting and shouting, weren't they?
- 4b). Weren't dancers twisting and shouting?

In order to explain the concept more fully.

- 5a). In order to explain the concept more fully, isn't it?
- 5b). Isn't in order to explain the concept more fully?

If you need further instructions.

- 6a). If you need further instructions, don't you?
- 6b). Don't if you need further instructions?

Whatever is necessary to get the job done.

- 7a). Whatever is necessary to get the job done, isn't it?
- 7b). Isn't whatever is necessary to get the job done?