Fragment Tip 1

Recognize a fragment when you see one.

A ***fragment*** is an incomplete ***sentence*** that begins with a capital letter and concludes with an end mark—usually a period [**.**] but sometimes a question mark [**?**] or an exclamation point [**!**]. The fragment will not, however, contain a ***main clause***, the one grammatical unit essential in every sentence.

A main clause looks like this:

Subject + **Verb** = **Complete Thought**.

When you write fragments, you indicate that you cannot control a sentence, the most basic building block of writing. As a result, your reader will have a low opinion of the document.

Every sentence must pass three tests before you can call it complete.

Test 1 – Find the verb.

Every sentence must have a ***verb***. Verbs express action or connect important information to the ***subject***.

Look at the complete sentences that follow:

The happy calculus students ***shouted*** in the cafeteria.

Dr. Ribley ***had curved*** the grades on their difficult midterm exam.

Other students ***were*** upset at the noise.

When you are proofreading a sentence, you will sometimes find a verbal instead of a verb. A ***verbal*** is unable to change form; you cannot, for example, add ***s*** or ***ed*** to the end of one.

Read the examples below:

The happy calculus students ***shouting*** in the cafeteria.

Dr Ribley ***having curved*** the grades on their midterm exam.

Other students ***being*** upset at all of the noise.

These last three examples are fragments because they fail **Test 1**.

Test 2 – Find the subject.

If you find an ***action verb*** in the sentence, the ***subject*** is whoever or whatever is doing that action. If, on the other hand, you find a ***linking verb***, such as ***am***, ***is***, ***are***, ***was***, or ***were***, the subject is usually whoever or whatever comes before the verb. Here are two sample sentences:

The ***refrigerator*** hummed in the kitchen.

What was humming? The fridge!

The coffee maker ***was*** annoyed.

What was annoyed? The coffee maker!

Sometimes writers assume that we know who or what the subject is, so they leave it out. Read the example that follows:

The coffee maker was annoyed. And the next morning ***hissed*** more vehemently than usual.

What hissed? The coffee maker did. Unfortunately, coffee maker is not part of the word group beginning with ***And***. As a result, this word group is a fragment because it fails **Test 2**.

Test 3 – Find the complete thought.

Between every capital letter and end mark, readers expect a complete thought. A ***subordinate clause***, for example, has both a ***subject*** and a ***verb***. However, the clause also begins with a ***subordinate conjunction*** such as ***because***, ***if***, or ***since***; or a ***relative pronoun*** such as ***who***, ***which***, or ***that***; or a ***relative adverb*** such as ***when***, ***where***, or ***why***. These opening words keep the subject and verb from expressing a complete thought.

Look at the example below:

When Kara caught sight of her ex-boyfriend Rob.

When Kara saw Rob, what happened? We don't know because the thought is incomplete. This word group is thus a fragment because it fails **Test 3**.

Quick Test

Directions: Put an **X** by the item if the word group is a fragment. Write **OK** by the item if the word group passes the three tests for a complete sentence.

1. When Sammy discovers the empty carton of vanilla ice cream, he will explode with anger.

2. Jeanne, engrossed in another trashy romance novel, did not realize the meatloaf was still in the freezer.

3. Alex needs to bring home some roses if he wants Mimi to forgive him for flirting with Helen.

4. Belching black exhaust that suffocated the drivers who followed.

5. The can of whipped cream that Diane used to squirt into the mouth of Santana, her beagle.

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