Sentence structure

Paragraphs are made up of sentences that relate to each other, so you'll need well-formed sentences to make sure your paragraphs are strong. In this section we'll look at some of the most common problems students have with forming sentences.

Introduction to basic sentences

The simplest sentences tell you about something happening or some relationship between things. Let's take an example sentence (in bold):

> **The Federal Government deals with matters such as defence and immigration.**

(Example from Inglis, 2007, p. 247).

This is a simple sentence that tells us about one relationship or happening: X deals with Y. 'Deals with' is the most important word group because it represents the process or relationship in the sentence. It's the <u>verb</u> (or verbal group) in the sentence. Every other word group is related to the verb in some way:

- **Who or what** <u>deals with</u> matters such as defence and immigration? The Federal Government.
- The Federal Government <u>deals with</u> **what**? Matters such as defence and immigration.

So there are three main word groups in this sentence:

1. The Federal Government (X)
2. <u>deals with</u> (verb)
3. matters such as defence and immigration. (Y)

Tip!

The verb is the most important word in the clause, so make sure every clause has a verb that represents the process or relationship you are describing. Every sentence must have at least one verb!

Let's take another sentence:

> **Active learning <u>involves</u> skills such as planning and relating new information to previously learned information.**
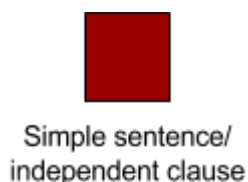
(Example from Inglis, 2007, p. 253)

Although the verb (involves) is different this time, the structure is still the same: X involves Y. In this case, the Y part is a bit longer and includes some verbs in it such as 'planning' and 'relating'. But the

basic structure is the same, and the extra verbs are just part of a description of 'skills'. We can represent this structure in a table:

X	Verb (group)	Y
Active learning	*involves*	*skills such as planning and relating new information to previously learned information.*

Simple sentences like these that can stand by themselves become the building blocks for more complex sentences. Let's represent it as a square block – it stands firmly on the ground:

Simple sentence/
independent clause

In the following two sentences there are two parts (or clauses) that each have their own verb. The clause in bold is the basic claim that can stand by itself. You could put a full stop after it, and it would still be a well-formed sentence, e.g. 'Deep learning is an active process'.
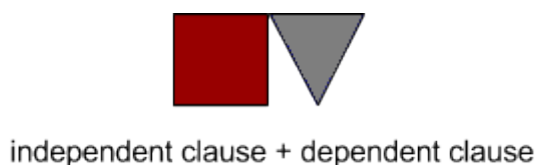
The second clause in each example elaborates on the first clause. These clauses can't stand by themselves because each has a particular connecting word (conjunction, in *italics*) that means it has to stay attached to a standalone (or independent) clause. These clauses are called dependent clauses.

Deep learning is an active process *whereas* surface learning is passive.

Families are more likely to have children *if* the children are needed to work the farm.

Independent clause	Dependent clause
Families are more likely to have children	*if* the children are needed to work the farm.
Deep learning is an active process	*whereas* surface learning is passive.

We could represent these sentences as a square block (standalone clause) followed by an upside down triangle (dependent clause). The upside down triangle is unstable, but the square block holds it up. But if the square block (standalone clause) isn't there to support it, the triangle (dependent clause) will fall over. The next section on sentence fragments explains this in more detail.

independent clause + dependent clause

Sentence fragments

When you look at feedback on your writing, you might find a comment from the marker such as 'sentence fragment'. That means that the sentence is somehow incomplete and doesn't convey a complete idea.

As we saw above, if you use a dependent clause, you also need an independent clause in the same sentence to complete the idea. If you don't have that independent clause, you'll end up with a sentence fragment.

But how can you tell if you have sentence fragments or stray dependent clauses? There are a few main features that make clauses dependent and unable to stand alone.

Some conjunctions (joining words) make a clause dependent

Some examples of conjunctions that make a clause dependent and unable to stand alone are shown below. In case you're interested and want to explore them further, the technical term for these is 'subordinating conjunctions', because they make one clause subordinate to another.

after	because	in order to, in order that
since	unless	whereas
although (or even though)	before	instead of
so that	until	wherever
as, as long as, as soon as	if	once
though	when	while

Whenever you use these conjunctions, make sure that the sentence also has a standalone clause to complete the idea:

'*Whereas* surface learning is passive.' – incomplete, can't stand alone, like the triangle below.

'Deep learning is active, *whereas* surface learning is passive.' – complete.

The second clause presents contrasting information ('whereas'), and it needs the first clause to have something to add its contrasting information to.

Some verb forms make a clause dependent

Even if a clause doesn't have one of the conjunctions above, it can still be dependent and unable to stand alone. If you use the 'to' form of the verb or the 'ing' form, that will also make your clause unable to stand alone. To illustrate:
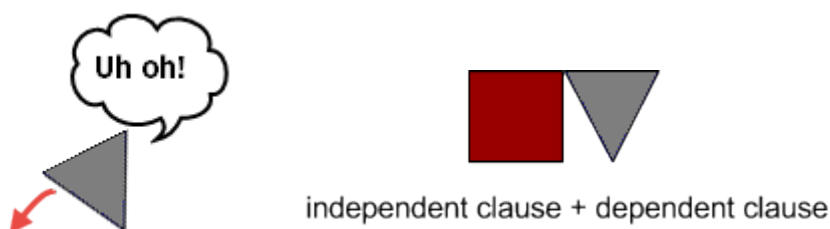
A person may experience many difficulties during the transition period from layperson to the newly acquired role of nurse. **Requiring a whole change of lifestyle so many adaptations must be made in order to fulfil the requirements of that role.**

(Example adapted from Inglis, 2007, p. 165)

The sentence in bold has three clauses, as shown in the following table:

(1) <u>Requiring</u> a whole change of lifestyle	**Dependent**: the verb is in the 'ing' form, which means it can't stand alone. This sentence relies on the previous sentence to complete the idea. Clause 2 in this sentence doesn't help it stand up because it's a new idea.
(2) so many adaptations <u>must be made</u>	**Independent**: 'so' is a conjunction that does NOT make a clause dependent. This clause completes the idea of clause 3.
(3) *in order <u>to fulfil</u>* the requirements of that role.	**Dependent**: the conjunction 'in order (to)' makes a clause dependent. Also, the verb 'to fulfil' is the 'to' form of the verb, which makes the clause unable to stand alone. This clause relies on clause 2 to stand up.

We could represent this sentence as follows:

independent clause + dependent clause

A better way of writing this sentence would be:

This **requires** a whole change of lifestyle, so many adaptations must be made in order to fulfil the requirements of that role.

The verb is changed from the 'ing' form, 'requiring', to the present tense (see 'Tense' below), 'requires'. Now the clause can stand alone.

The whole sentence now looks like this:

Simple sentence/
independent clause

independent clause + dependent clause

'Run-on' sentences

Sometimes the marker might write a comment like 'run-on sentence'. That means that the sentence contains too many ideas! You might need to break up the ideas into more than one sentence, or you might need to use a conjunction to show the logical connection between the ideas.

Here's an example from a piece of reflective writing:

Learning grammar and translation skills seems to me to be like a linguistic security blanket of sorts, these skills are something students can practise by themselves, and there is little danger of embarrassment in doing drills and exercises.

(Example adapted from Inglis, 2007, p. 191)

This sentence has three clauses, each with its own main verb, as shown in the table below:

(1) Learning grammar and translation skills <u>seems</u> to me <u>to be</u> like a linguistic security blanket of sorts,	Independent clause: the verb is in present tense and the clause doesn't have a conjunction that would make it dependent.
(2) these skills <u>are</u> something students can practise by themselves,	Independent clause: again, the verb is in present tense and the clause doesn't have a conjunction that would make it dependent. This idea is not joined to clause (1) with a conjunction that shows how it relates to the idea in that clause.
(3) and there <u>is</u> little danger of embarrassment in doing drills and exercises.	Independent clause: again, the verb is in present tense and the clause doesn't have a conjunction that would make it dependent. It has the conjunction 'and' which joins it to clause (2) as an additional idea.

When you have independent clauses all in a row like this, it's important to show how each one is related to the others, otherwise you need to make a new sentence. This group of clauses would be better written as two sentences:

(1) Learning grammar and translation skills seems to me to be like a linguistic security blanket of sorts. (2) These skills are something students can practise by themselves, and there is little danger of embarrassment in doing drills and exercises.

This way, clause/sentence (1) becomes a kind of topic sentence, and sentence (2) explains the metaphor of the 'security blanket' by giving more detail about the skills.

Tip!

When proofreading your work, read each sentence carefully and try to count how many main ideas are in each one. Are the ideas logically connected? Do you need to break the sentence up or clarify the relationship between ideas with a conjunction?

The following table gives examples of different kinds of connecting words and phrases that you can use to join ideas together. Each row shows a particular kind of meaning relationship that you might want to show between ideas.

Please note that even if two words or phrases appear in the same category, it doesn't mean they have the same meaning or usage. Choose carefully and make sure you ask someone to proofread your writing to make sure that your meaning is clear.

Meaning relationship	Examples of connecting words and phrases		
Ordering information in a time sequence	initially at first first of all first(ly)/second(ly)/third(ly) next/then meanwhile while up to now before/before that	previously prior to after/afterwards thereafter subsequently ultimately lastly/finally presently soon	formerly concurrently since since then when eventually gradually simultaneously
Adding information	also in addition moreover or	and/and then furthermore additionally besides (this)	again indeed in fact
Showing cause/effect or reasoning	therefore consequently as as a consequence as a result accordingly	because because of this so/so that for this reason in that case hence	since thus now that for then
Generalising information	in most cases usually frequently	mainly for the most part	in most cases typically
Concluding information	in conclusion/to conclude in summary on the whole finally	conversely therefore ultimately	thus so in short
Contrasting information (showing difference)	however nevertheless yet/and yet on the one hand… on the other hand though/although even though otherwise	in spite of while instead in contrast alternatively either… or neither… nor	but on the contrary a different view despite whereas by comparison
Comparing information (showing similarity)	similarly/similar to also as like	likewise correspondingly equal/equally in the same way	in this case similar to both… and
Example/analogy	in other words for example for instance	such as as follows to demonstrate	to illustrate that is
Highlighting information	in particular particularly	especially notably	
Showing conditional information	if/even if unless whether	provided on condition (that)	in case otherwise

(Adapted from HALL, 2015; Inglis, 2007, pp. 260, 262)

References

Hub for Academic Literacy and Learning (HALL). (2015). Connectors to unify your text.

Inglis, M. (2007). *Unistep. Academic skills guide*. (4th ed.). Sydney, Australia.