Sentence Types and Functions

Choosing what types of sentences to use in an essay can be challenging for several reasons. The writer must consider the following questions: Are my ideas simple or complex? Do my ideas require shorter statements or longer explanations? How do I express my ideas clearly? This handout discusses the basic components of a sentence, the different types of sentences, and various functions of each type of sentence.

What Is a Sentence?

* A sentence is a complete set of words that conveys meaning. A sentence can communicate
  + a statement (I am studying.)
  + a command (Go away.)
  + an exclamation (I’m so excited!)
  + a question (What time is it?)
* A sentence is composed of one or more clauses. A clause contains a subject and verb.

Independent and Dependent Clauses

* There are two types of clauses: independent clauses and dependent clauses. A sentence contains at least one independent clause and may contain one or more dependent clauses.
* An independent clause (or main clause)
  + is a complete thought.
  + can stand by itself.
* A dependent clause (or subordinate clause)
  + is an incomplete thought.
  + cannot stand by itself.

You can spot a dependent clause by identifying the subordinating conjunction. A subordinating conjunction creates a dependent clause that relies on the rest of the sentence for meaning. The following list provides some examples of subordinating conjunctions.

* after • as • before • if • though • while • unless • although • because • even though
* since • when • until • whereas

Independent and Dependent Clauses

Independent clause: When I go to the movies, **I usually buy popcorn.**

Dependent clause: **When I go to the movies,** I usually buy popcorn.

Independent clause: **I don’t like the ocean** because sharks scare me.

Dependent clause: I don’t like the ocean **because sharks scare me.**

What Are the Different Types of Sentences?

Sentences are divided into four categories: simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences, and compound-complex sentences.

***Simple Sentences***

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| Definition | A simple sentence contains oneindependent clause. |
| Examples | * Johnny rode his bike to school. * Who is your best friend? * She ate her lunch, took a walk, and went back to work. |

***Compound Sentences***

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| Definition | A compound sentence contains twoindependent clauses. A **coordinating**  **conjunction** (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) often links the two independent clauses and is preceded by a comma. |
| Examples | * She wanted to go on vacation, **so** she saved up her money. * I like apples, **but** my sister loves bananas. * Tim loves to read, **and** he also loves to hike. |

***Complex Sentences***

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| Definition | A complex sentence contains one independent clause and one or more dependent clauses. A complex sentence will include at least one **subordinating conjunction.** |
| Examples | * She went to class **even though** she was sick. * **As** John was arriving to work, he realized he forgot his lunch. * **While** I enjoy classical music, I prefer rock and roll **because** I play the drums. |

***Compound-Complex Sentences***

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| Definition |  | A compound-complex sentence combines complex sentence and compound sentence forms. A compound-complex sentence contains one or more independent clauses and one or more dependent clauses. |
| Examples |  | **Although** she felt guilty for missing her friend’s birthday, she took her out to dinner the next day, **and** they had a great time. |
|  |  | I try to eat healthy food, **but** **because** fast food is so convenient, I cannot maintain a healthy diet. |
|  |  | **If** he got the job, he would have to commute 50 miles to work, **so** he decided the job was not worth it. |

**What Are the Functional Purposes of each Type of Sentence?**

Because each type of sentence can serve various functions, the writer should use the type of sentence that best communicates the purpose of his or her idea.

* Choose the sentence type that will most clearly and accurately convey the logic of your idea.
* Consider the amount of information your readers need, and consider the links the readers need to process the information.
* Vary sentence structures to pace your readers through your argument.

***Functions of Simple Sentences***

Use simple sentences when presenting a limited amount of information. Although simple sentences may be shorter, they are not any less academic than other sentence types.

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| To declare a direct statement |    | First, I will give background information about my project. This conclusion is supported by extensive evidence. |
| To display a simple  list |  | The researchers created their hypothesis, conducted some tests, and drew their conclusions. |
|  |  | My evidence comes from journal articles, periodicals, and books. |
| To give concise directions |    | Please consider my application for the internship. Turn to Table 1 in the appendix. |
| To ask a question |  | What is the true meaning of the poem? |
|  |  | What will this study mean to medical research in a decade? |

***Functions of Compound, Complex, and Compound-Complex Sentences***

Compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences can serve similar purposes. The writer can tailor the amount of information he or she provides by adding independent and dependent clauses to simple sentences.

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| To combine similar ideas |  | **Compound**: Recycling is an effective way of helping the environment, and everyone should recycle at home. |
|  |  | **Complex**: Since recycling is an effective way of helping the environment, everyone should recycle at home. |
|  |  | **Compound-Complex**: Since recycling is an effective way of helping the environment, everyone should recycle at home; we can all work together to protect our planet. |
| To compare or contrast ideas |  | **Compound**: Van Gogh was a talented and successful artist, but he had intense personal issues. |
|  |  | **Complex**: Although he was a talented and successful artist, Van Gogh had intense personal issues. |
|  |  | **Compound-Complex**: Although he was a talented and successful artist, Van Gogh had intense personal issues; indeed, many say his inner turmoil contributed to his beautiful art. |
| To convey cause and effect or chain of  events |  | **Compound**: The researchers did not come to the correct conclusion, so they restructured their hypothesis. |
|  |  | **Complex**: Since the researchers did not come to the correct conclusion, they restructured their hypothesis. |
|  |  | **Compound-Complex**: Since the researchers did not come to the correct conclusion, they restructured their hypothesis, and they will attempt the experiment again. |
| To elaborate on a claim or extend reasoning |    | **Compound**: Cell phones should not be permitted in class, for they distract students and teachers.  **Complex**:Since cell phones distract students and teachers, they should not be used in class. |
|  |  | **Compound-Complex**: Since cell phones distract students and teachers, they should not be used in class, and I encourage faculty to forbid their use. |