An Introduction to Sentences

This booklet is for English Language Learners who want to improve their grammar. It introduces the main types of sentences in English. It has been written for students at intermediate and upper-intermediate levels of English.

What is a Sentence?

A sentence is a basic unit of writing (as well as speaking) that forms a complete grammatical structure. It consists of at least one *independent clause*, begins with a CAPITAL letter, and ends with a punctuation mark such as a full stop [●], a question mark [**?**], or an exclamation mark [**!**]**.** This booklet focuses on written English since spoken English is more flexible in terms of the use of sentences.

Sentence Component Parts

Sentences are made up of 5 basic component, or parts. There are 2 essential components – *subject*, and *verb*. Sentences can be expanded by adding one or more of 3 optional or contextual components – *object (direct or indirect)*, *complement (subject or object)*, *adverbial (where, when, how, why)*.

- **Subjects** are used for the 'doer' or topic of the sentence.
- **Verbs** are used to talk about actions, states, or events.
- **Objects** are the persons or things affected by the verb.
- **Complements** complete the meaning of a verb by renaming or describing a subject or object.
- **Adverbials** give extra contextual details about where, when, how or why a verb happened or was experienced.

Figure 1: Examples of Essential Components

Subjects

Textbooks [plural noun] are expensive.

The purpose of this textbook [noun phrase] is to give an overview of the subject.

Verbs

This chapter will *discuss* [verb describing an action] psychology in advertising.
The student *is* [verb describing a state] very tired from studying long hours.

See Glossary of Terms for a description of the meaning of grammatical words and phrases

Figure 2: Examples of Optional and Contextual Components

Examples of objects

The student handed in *her homework* [direct object].
The student's parents talked *to her teacher* [indirect object].

Examples of complements

Academic writing [subject] is *difficult* [subject complement].
Academic writing makes students [object] feel *stressed* [object complement].

Examples of adverbials

Where? The course is offered *at the University of Glasgow* [adverbial].
When? Many students graduate *when they are in their early twenties* [adverbial].
How? Psychologists study the mind *by observing human behaviour* [adverbial].
Why? Psychology is important *because so little is known about the mind* [adverbial].

Types of Sentences in English

There are 4 basic types of sentence in English:

1) **Simple**
2) **Compound**
3) **Complex**
4) **Compound-complex**

Simple Sentences (1) contain one main part that forms a complete grammatical unit. This is called an *independent clause* and expresses a subject-verb relationship as a complete, unified idea to reader. Note that a clause, by definition, needs a *finite verb* (i.e. a verb that has a subject, shows tense, and agrees with its subject). *Compound Sentences* (2) are made up of two or more independent clauses each expressing a subject-verb relationship. One thing to remember about Sentence Types 1 and 2 is that they are made up of independent clauses. In contrast, *Complex sentences* (3) and *Compound-complex Sentences* (4) are made up of at least one independent clause and a second type of clause called a *dependent clause*. Dependent clauses (also called *subordinate clauses*) need to be linked to an independent clause to form a complete grammatical unit.

Example Text: Students at a University Library

The short narrative below uses a variety of sentence types and sentence patterns. Examples in Figures 3-6 are based on the scenario of a group of students who are in their university library and are working together to finish a project. The text uses vocabulary drawn from the **Oxford 3000™** and **AWL Sublist 1**.

"The Falling Book"



Illustration 1: Maya's group working on an assignment.
Image courtesy of magnific.com

A group of students sat around a large library table. They were working intensely on a group project; the deadline was rapidly approaching. Suddenly, a heavy book fell off a top shelf and just missed Maya's head. The sudden noise startled everyone, so the librarian quickly walked over to investigate.

Maya picked up the heavy book from the floor and opened it. Although the librarian wanted her to put the book back immediately, Maya noticed an interesting chart which was based on historical data analysis. She examined the section and realised that it contained the exact source material her project group needed to finish their project. Although time was running out, the group quickly revised their final conclusion using the new evidence, and Maya submitted their assignment three minutes before the deadline.

Simple Sentences

The 5 basic components of sentences (*subjects*, *verbs*, *objects*, *complements*, *adverbials*) can be combined in many ways to form *Simple Sentences*. What defines Simple Sentences is that they contain ***ONE subject-verb relationship*** (i.e. an independent clause). They are described as *Simple* because they contain *ONE independent clause* that forms a complete grammatical unit. A key point to remember is that Simple Sentences must contain at least one subject and at least one verb. Objects, complements, and adverbials are optional elements that can be added to expand the length of a sentence. Adding a capital letter at the beginning and a punctuation mark at the end makes a single independent clause a Simple Sentence. In spite of the name, Simple Sentences can in fact be long and difficult to understand.

Figure 3: Examples of Simple Sentence Patterns

Example 1: subject + verb

A book [subject] *fell* [verb].

Example 2: subject + (compound) verb + direct object

Maya [subject] *picked up* [verb 1] *the book* [object] and *opened* [verb 2] it.

Example 3: subject + verb + indirect object + direct object

Maya [subject] *showed* [verb] *the chart* [direct object] *to her group* [indirect object].

Example 4: subject + verb + subject complement

The book [subject] *was* [verb] *very heavy* [subject complement].

Example 5: (compound) subject + verb + complement

Maya [subject 1] *and her group* [subject 2] *were* [verb] *classmates* [complement].

Example 6: subject + verb + object + object complement

The student [subject] *found* [verb] *the book* [object] *interesting* [object complement].

Example 7: subject + verb + adverbial

A group of students [subject] *sat* [verb] *around a large library table* [adverbial].

Example 8: subject + verb + object + adverbial

Maya [subject] *picked up* [verb] *the heavy book* [object] *from the floor* [adverbial].

Example 9: subject + verb + object + adverbial

The group [subject] *were working* [verb] *on their project* [object] *intensely* [adverbial].

Compound Sentences

What defines a Compound Sentence is that they have ***TWO (or more) independent clauses*** joined by a ***connector***, or linking device. To put it another way, Compound sentences connect, or *coordinate, TWO (or more) subject-verb relationships*. There are 3 main linking devices for *coordinating* independent clauses in compound sentences:

1) **Coordinating conjunction** (e.g. and, but, or)
2) **Semicolon** (;).
3) **Semicolon** (;) **+ a conjunctive adverb** (e.g. however, moreover)

A *Coordinating Conjunction* is also called a *Coordinator*. To remember the the main coordinating conjunctions in English, you can use the mnemonic, FANBOYS. Each letter stands for a conjunction:

F – **F**or *(meaning "because" or "since" in formal contexts);*
A – **A**nd *(adds information);*
N – **N**or *(presents a negative alternative);*
B – **B**ut *(shows contrast);*
O – **O**r *(presents a choice or alternative);*
Y – **Y**et *(shows contrast, similar to "but" or "nevertheless");*
S – **S**o *(shows result or consequence).*

The use of a *semi-colon* is important in compound sentences. If a full stop [●] is used, this is two sentences. Using a compound sentence rather than 2 sentences creates flow, and continuity of thought. To put it another way, using a compound sentence is like telling the reader that 2 ideas belong together in the same picture and in the same breath (if reading aloud). Note that if a comma [**,**] is used, this is a grammatical error called a comma splice. Compare:

*They were working intensely on a group project**;** the deadline was rapidly approaching*.
[compound sentence]
*The students were working intensely on a group project**.** The deadline was rapidly approaching*. [2 sentences]
✖*The students were working intensly on a group project**,** the deadline was rapidly approaching*. [grammatical error]

Conjunctive adverbs are sometimes called *adverbial connectors*, or *linking adverbs.* The purpose or function of a conjuctive adverb is to show a logical connection between 2 independent clauses (e.g. *contrast*, *cause-effect*, *addition*). At intermediate and upper-intermediate levels of English (CEFR B1/B2), learners of English are expected to use a range of *conjunctive adverbs* to express logical relationships. Common conjunctive adverbs for CEFR B1/CEFR B2 are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: List of Conjunctive Adverbs CEFR B1/B2

Logical relationship	Example conjunctive adverbs
Time / Sequence	meanwhile, then, afterwards, finally
Contrast / Concession	however, nevertheless, on the other hand, instead
Result / Cause & Effect	therefore, as a result, consequently, thus
Addition	moreover, furthermore, in addition, besides
Illustration / Emphasis	for example, for instance, in fact, indeed

Note that conjunctive adverbs can move position in the independent clause:

*They were working intensly; **in fact,** the deadline was rapidly approaching.*
*They were working intensely; the deadline was rapidly approaching, **in fact**.*

Examples of compound sentence patterns are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Examples of Compound Sentence Patterms

Example 1

The group quickly revised their final conclusion using the new evidence [clause 1] **and** [coordinator] *Maya submitted their assigment* [clause 2].

Example 2

The librarian wanted Maya to put the book back immediately [clause 1] **but** [coordinator] *Maya noticed something on the page of the book* [clause 2].

Example 3

The sudden noise startled everyone [clause 1] **so** [coordinator] *the librarian quickly walked over to investigate* [clause 2].

Example 4

The students were working intensely on a group project [clause 1] **;** [semi-colon] *the deadline was rapidly approaching* [clause 2].

Example 5

The deadline was rapidly approaching [clause 1] **; consequently,** [semi-colon + conjunctive adverb] *the students were working intensely.*

Example 6

The students were tired [clause 1] **; however,** [semi-colon + conjunctive adverb] *they submitted their project on time* [clause 2].

Example 7

The students were tired [clause 1] **;** [semi-colon] *they submitted their project on time* [clause 2], **however** [conjunctive adverb].

Complex Sentences

A complex sentence has ***one main (independent) clause,*** and ***one (or more) dependent (or subordinate) clause(s)*** starting with ***a subordinator*** *or* ***relative pronoun***. The *main clause* expresses a complete thought and can stand alone as a sentence. The *dependent clause* adds information, such as reason, time, condition, or description; it cannot stand alone as a complete sentence. A *dependent clause* can be introduced by a *subordinating conjunction (subordinator).* At intermediate and upper-intermediate levels of English (CEFR B1/B2), learners of English are expected to use a range of *subordinators* to express logical relationships such as *contrast*, *condition*, and *result*. Common subordinators for CEFR B1/CEFR B2 are shown in Table 1.

Table 2: List of Subordinators for CEFR B1/B2

Logical relationship	Example subordinators
Time / Sequence	after, before, as soon as, while, when, until, since, as, whenever
Comparison	than, as .... as
Concession / Contrast	although, though, even though, whereas, while
Reason / Cause	because, as, since
Condition	if, unless, provided that, as long as, in case, even if
Purpose	so that, in order that
Result	so... that, such... that

A dependent clause can be a *relative clause* (also called an *adjective clause*) connected to a main (independent) clause by a *relative pronoun* (e.g. *who*, *which*, *that*). Words such as *where*, *when*, and *why* are often taught alongside relative pronouns for introducing relative clauses. However, these are *relative adverbs* not relative pronouns. Relative pronouns used in complex sentences are shown in Table 2.

Table 3: List of Relative Pronouns

Pronoun	Usage Notes
Who	Refers to people and is used in subject position
Whom	Refers to people and is used in object position and is formal
Which	Refers to animals, objects, or whole ideas
That	Refers to people, animals, or objects and is used in defining clauses
Whose	Shows possession for people or objects

Examples of complex sentences are shown in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5: Examples of Complex Sentences

Example 1

A heavy book fell off the shelf [main clause] **while** [subordinator] *the group were working on their project* [dependent clause].

Example 2

Even though [subordinator] *the librarian wanted Maya to put the book back immediately* [dependent clause], *Maya stood staring at the book.* [main clause].

Example 3

As [subordinator] *Maya looked at the book* [dependent clause], *she noticed something interesting*.

Example 4

The group quickly revised their final conclusion [main clause] ***although*** [subordinator] *time was running out* [dependent clause].

Example 5

The librarian walked towards Maya [main clause] **who** [relative pronoun] *was staring at the book* [dependent clause].

Example 6

Maya and her classmates were working on a group project [main clause] **whose** [relative pronoun] *deadline was rapidly approaching* [dependent clause].

Example 7

A heavy-looking big book was hanging over the edge of the top shelf, **which** [relative pronoun] *Maya was sitting directly underneath* [dependent clause].

Example 8

Maya noticed a chart [main clause] **that** [relative pronoun] was based on historical data[dependent clause].

Example 9

Maya examined a section of the book [main clause] **which** [relative pronoun] *contained an interesting chart* [dependent clause].

Compound-complex Sentences

A Compound-complex sentence contains at least 3 clauses: ***two (or more) main (independent) clauses*** connected with a ***coordinator*** *(coordinating conjunction, semi-colon, or semi-colon + conjunctive adverb)*; ***one (or more) dependent (subordinate) clause*** starting with a ***subordinator*** (*subordinating conjunction* or *relative pronoun*). Each clause must contain a finite verb. Each main clause expresses a complete thought and can stand alone as a sentence. Each dependent clause adds information such as reason, time, condition, or description and cannot stand alone. A dependent clause needs a main clause to form a complete grammatical unit. At upper-intermediate and advanced levels of English (CEFR B2/C1), compound-complex sentences can help learners improve writing flow by connecting ideas efficiently.

Examples of compound-complex sentences are shown in Figure 6 below.

Figure 6: Examples of Compound-complex Sentences

Example 1

The university library was quiet [independent clause 1] ***and*** [coordinator] *the students were working intensely on their assignment* [independent clause 2] ***when*** *a heavy book fell off the top shelf* [dependent subordinating clause].

Example 2

The librarian asked Maya to put the book back on the shelf [independent clause 1], ***yet*** [coordinator] *Maya hesitated* [independent clause 2] ***because*** *the open page contained an interesting chart* [dependent subordinating clause].

Example 3

The chart caught the attention of the group [independent clause 1] ***who*** *realised its relevance to their assignment* [dependent relative clause]***;*** [coordinator] *the data it showed was a historical analysis on the very topic of their assignment* [independent clause 2].

Example 4

The group were anxious about the assignment deadline [independent clause 1], ***but*** [coordinator] *Maya had noticed* [independent clause 2] ***that*** *the chart in the fallen book contained the perfect material for their project* [dependent relative clause].

Example 5

Although *time was running out* [dependent subordinating clause], *the group quickly revised their final conclusion using the new evidence* [independent clause 1], ***and*** [coordinator] *Maya submitted their assignment three minutes before the deadline* [independent clause 2].

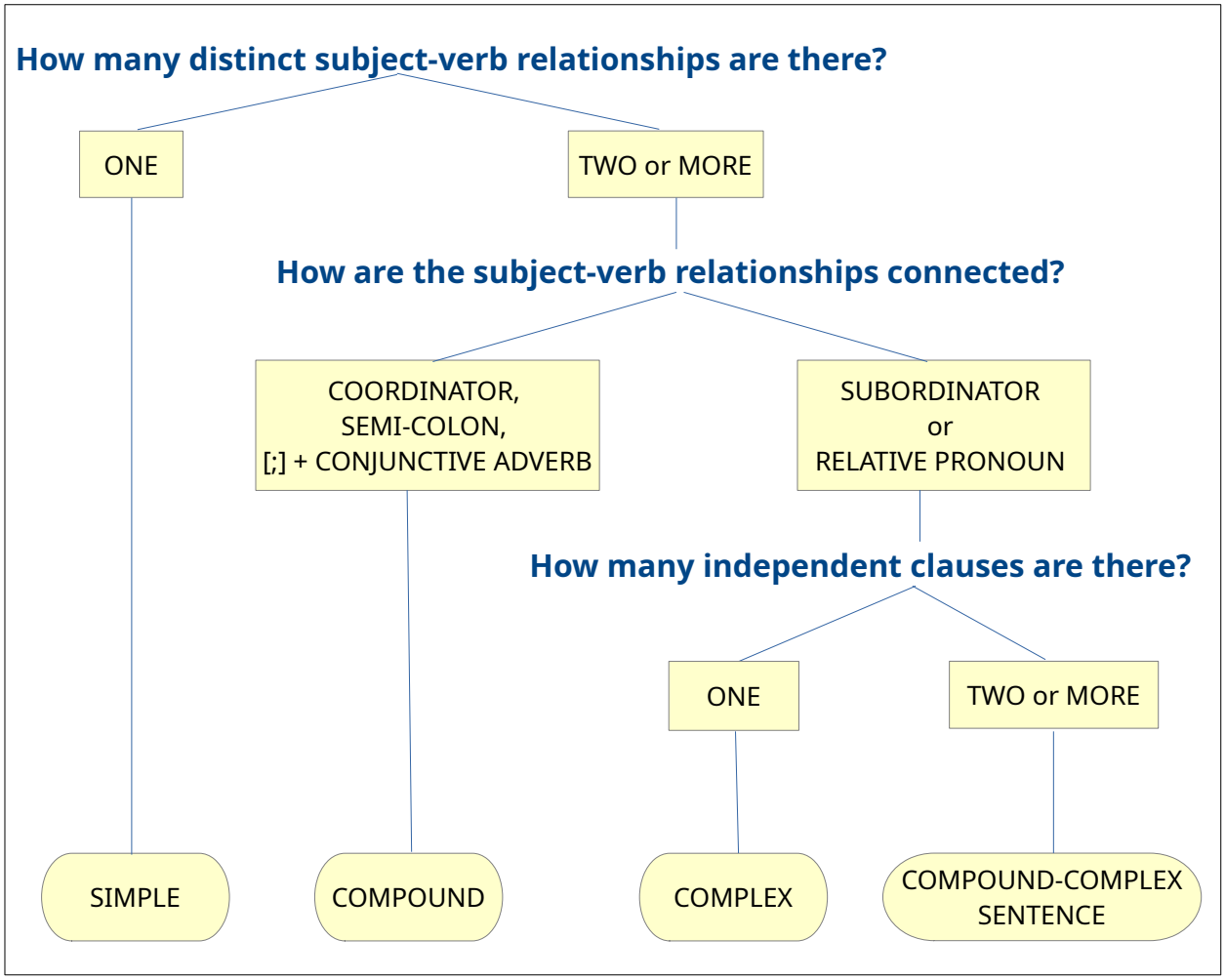
Summary

A sentence is a basic unit of writing or speaking that forms a complete grammatical structure. There are 5 basic components used in sentences. These are subjects, verbs, objects, complements, and adverbials.

Sentences are made up of clauses (independent and dependent). A clause, by definition, must contain a finite verb. There are 4 basic types of sentence structures in English:

1. **Simple:** 1 complete idea for the reader; 1 independent clause.
2. **Compound:** 2 or more complete ideas; 2+ independent clauses connected with a coordinator (i.e. FANBOYS or semi-colon, or both).
3. **Complex:** 1 complete idea; 1 independent clause AND 1 or more subordinate idea (1+ dependent clause(s) connected with a subordinator or relative pronoun.
4. **Compound-complex:** 2 or more complete ideas; 2+ independent clauses connected with a coordinator AND 1 or more dependent clause connected with a subordinator or relative pronoun.

Decision tree for identifying types of sentences



Glossary of Terms

Clause Components	Description
SUBJECT /ˈsʌbdʒekt/	The person or thing which performs the action or a verb (CLD).
VERB ˈ/vɜːb/	A word or phrase that describes an action, state, condition, or experience (CLD).
DIRECT OBJECT /daɪˈrek_ˈtɒbdʒekt/	A person , place, or thing that is affected by the action of a verb, or involved in the result of an action (CLD)
INDIRECT OBJECT /ˌɪndaɪˈrek_ˈtɒbdʒekt/	A person , place, or thing that benefits from the action of a verb (Adapted from Seely, 2009)
COMPLEMENT /ˈkɒmplɪment/	Part of a clause that completes information about a subject or object which appears earlier in the clause (Seely, 2009)
ADVERBIAL /ædˈvɜːbiəl/	A word or phrase that is used as an adverb in a clause and answers the question: *where*, *when*, or *why*? (Seely, 2009).

Clause Types	Description
SENTENCE /ˈsentəns/	Part of a sentence which contains a subject and a verb. It may also contain an object, complement or adverbial (Seely, 2009)
CLAUSE /klɔːz/	Part of a sentence that contains a subject and a verb. It may also contain an object, complement or adverbial (Seely, 2009).
MAIN CLAUSE	Part of a sentence which contains 2 or more clause components. Clause components are: subject; verb; object; complement; adverbial (Adapted from Seely, 2009).
INDEPENDENT CLAUSE /ˌɪndɪpɛnd(ə)nt ˈklɔːz/	a clause that can form a complete sentence standing alone, having a subject and a predicate (cf. Seely, 2009).
DEPENDENT CLAUSE /ˌdɪpɛnd(ə)nt ˈklɔːz/	Part of a sentence which 'can act as the subject, object, complement, or adverbial of the main clause' (Seely, 2009, p. 29). Also known as a '*subordinate clause*'.

Clause Linkers	Description
CONNECTIVE /kəˈnektɪv/	common connectives include; adverbials, coordinators and subordinators. These are used to link clauses (Seely, 2009).
COORDINATOR /kəʊˈɔːdɪneɪtə(r)/	A word which joins two main clauses (Seely, 2009). Common coordinators are; *and, but, or.*
SUBORDINATOR /səˈbɔːdɪnətə(r)/	A word which joins a main clause with a dependent (or subordinate) clause (Seely, 2009). Common subordinators are; *if, because, so, since, where, when, why.*

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