

Sentence Structure Guide

There are four sentence structures in English. Master these four structures, and your written expression will improve dramatically.

Simple sentence

As the name suggests, this is the easiest type of sentence to construct. But that certainly doesn't mean it's too simple for academic writing. Quite the contrary, simple sentences are terrific for your academic writing because they can be so clear and, well, simple.

A simple sentence has a **subject**, **verb**, and **object**. Your **subject** is the noun at the beginning of your sentence. It is the doer of the action to follow. Your **verb** is the action word that describes what the noun is doing. And your **object** is everything that follows your verb. It is the result of the action taking place. Here are some examples:

Chelsea **ran** to the shop.

This **research** **examines** the gender identity of two middle class women.

Simple sentences don't have to be short:

Chelsea **ran** to the shop to buy milk, eggs and ham for dinner that night.

This **research** **examines** the gender-fluid identity of three groups of women who work as professionals in the financial industry.

This **research** **examines** the success rate of Australian financial institutions and the barriers to wealth creation for everyday consumers.

This **essay** **argues** that a democracy can balance individual freedom with other concerns by putting strict limits on hate speech.

If you are not a very confident writer, stick to simple sentences. These are perfect sentences to write. As you can see, simple sentences can be short or long. After you've mastered combining **subjects**, **verbs** and **objects** together into clear sentences, then you can move on to the other three sentence types.

Compound sentence

In this sentence type, you use **and**, **or**, or **but** to connect two simple sentences together. Each 'half' of your compound sentence can stand on its own as a complete sentence. When you write a compound sentence, you have decided that both pieces are related, and therefore can be connected together into one sentence. Here are some examples:

Chelsea **ran** to the shop to buy milk, eggs and ham for dinner that night, **but** the shop **was** closed due to a power outage.

This **research** **examines** the success rate of Australian financial institutions **and** our **surveys** **reveal** the unique investment opportunities missed by everyday consumers.

This **study** **is** too general, and the other **study** **is** too narrow.

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Each 'half' of these sentences could have stood on their own.

Chelsea ran to the shop to buy milk, eggs and ham for dinner that night. The shop was closed due to a power outage.

The content of the sentence determines whether it should be combined or not. It's up to you whether you think your two simple sentences belong together in one sentence, connected by **and**, **or**, or **but**, or if you think your sentences should stand on their own. This is now a tool that you can use to improve the clarity of your writing.

Complex sentence

A complex sentence connects a **dependent clause** with an **independent clause**. An independent clause is a simple sentence. It is a sentence that can stand on its own. A dependent clause is a part of a sentence that cannot stand on its own. These clauses contain a **subject** and a **verb**, but do not express a complete thought. However, dependent clauses are very useful in your academic writing because they help you to communicate complex ideas. Here are some examples of dependent clauses:

Although Chelsea ran to the shop

While the research shows that the success rate of Australian financial institutions is high

Even though these results are accurate

All of these are dependent clauses. They can't stand on their own as sentences, but they do help you to introduce contrasts and build on your ideas. These dependent clauses need to be connected to an independent clause (a simple sentence), in order to express a complete thought. Here are some examples:

Although Chelsea ran to the shop, she didn't get there in time.

While the research shows that the success rate of Australian financial institutions is high, everyday consumers are missing out on important investment opportunities.

Even though these results are accurate, a larger study is still needed to prove the credibility of the findings.

Here is another sentence structure for you to use as a tool in your writing. Complex sentences can be very useful when you want to introduce a contrast, a result, and cause and effect.

Here's a list of words that introduce dependent clauses:

after	that
although	though
as	unless until
because	when
before	whenever
even if	where

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even though if in order that once provided that rather than since	whereas wherever whether while why so that than
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(<http://www.chompchomp.com/terms/subordinateclause.htm>)

Compound-complex sentence

These are the trickiest sentence types. By now, you can probably guess that this sentence type combines a compound sentence with a complex one. So, a dependent clause is combined with a compound sentence. Even though these sentences are indeed tricky, with practice they should become easier to write, and, more importantly, easy to read. Here are some examples:

Since the shop was closed, Chelsea ran home and her sister made her a cheese sandwich.

Because everyday consumers are missing out on important investment opportunities, this research aims to show firms how to teach clients about investing and to help clients understand the technical information provided by firms.

While the first study was too general, the second study was too narrow and it was conducted without ethics approval.

Only attempt these sentences if you do indeed have something complex to express, and you feel it would be best expressed within one sentence. The above examples could have easily been written as one simple sentence and one complex sentence, or two or three simple sentences. The kind of sentence structure you choose is up to you. Increasingly, that choice should depend on what you feel the reader needs in order to be carefully guided through your ideas.

Final tips

- A sentence only conveys one thought
- A sentence needs a subject, verb and object
- Choose to write simple sentences more often than not
- Choose to write short sentences instead of long ones

Mastering these four sentence structures means writing clear sentences, and it means avoiding composing sentences that are too long for the reader to grasp. Practice all four structures, while mainly focusing on the simple sentence. If you can clearly combine subject, verb and object then you are well on your way to communicating clear ideas.