



Sentence Structures

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Introduction

This resource is intended as an introduction to the four basic sentence structures – simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex. It attempts to break down each structure to show the possible patterns a writer might use in their work. It is by no means exhaustive, but hopefully provides a firm overview. The terminology presented here is what I use in my teaching. However, as with all terminology, there are different interpretations. So, please use this as a guide rather than a be-all-and-end-all of how things work.



SIMPLE

A sentence that is made up of a single independent clause. It has a subject and a verb, and these are usually followed by a complement of some sort.

SUBJECT + VERB

Intransitive verb: Sarah yawned

Phrasal verb: Henry jumps up

Continuous verb: Sarah is yawning

Passive verb: The apple was eaten

Subject + auxiliary verb + main verb: I might go

SUBJECT + VERB + COMPLEMENT

Adverb complement: Sarah yawned loudly

Noun complement: I like football

Adjective-noun complement: I like simple things

Verb complement (infinitive): I like to sing

Verb complement (gerund): I like singing

Verb phrase complement: I like singing pop songs

SUBJECT + VERB + PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE

I ran through the field

SUBJECT + VERB + COMPLEMENT + PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE

I played football in the park

SUBJECT + PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE + VERB + COMPLEMENT

The man by the bus stop has brown hair

PREPOSITIONAL SUBJECT + VERB + COMPLEMENT

Before the party would be a good time to meet

VERBAL SUBJECT + VERB + COMPLEMENT

Learning Chinese is hard

COMPOUND SUBJECT + SINGLE VERB + SINGLE COMPLEMENT

Faizal and I played football

SINGLE SUBJECT + COMPOUND VERB

Carlos laughed and coughed and spluttered

SINGLE SUBJECT + SINGLE VERB + COMPOUND COMPLEMENT

I'll learn French, Swahili or Urdu



A sentence that is made up of two (or more) simple sentences connected together by a colon or conjunction.

LINKING WITH A COLON

She loves me; she loves me not

LINKING WITH COORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS

“And”: I played piano and she listened to me play

“But”: Jade thought the party was at seven-thirty, but Charlotte was certain it started at eight

“Or”: She might go to the park or she might stay at home

“So”: It was late, so she took a taxi

“For”: The café wasn't a possibility, for it wasn't open after six

“Nor”: Taylor didn’t think the girl was clever, nor did he think she was attractive in any way

“Yet”: I’ve done it many times before, yet I still doubt my ability to turn an idea into a story

LINKING WITH COORDINATING ADVERBS

Giving an example: Fruit is good for you; for example, an apple contains vitamins and antioxidants

Adding consequence: The road was blocked; therefore, we had to find another way

Adding contrast: I didn’t go to school today; instead, I went for a walk

THREE OR MORE SIMPLE SENTENCES JOINED TOGETHER

I came; I saw; I conquered

I played the piano and she sang and the audience cheered wildly



COMPLEX

A sentence that is made up of a main clause and one (or more) dependent clauses. They can branch to the left (left-branching), to the right (right-branching), or the dependent clause might sit between the subject and the verb (mid-branching).

LEFT-BRANCHING SENTENCE

Dependent clause + main clause: Although she’d been on her feet all day, she didn’t complain about having to stand

Gerund phrase + main clause: Barging through the door, he entered the room

RIGHT-BRANCHING SENTENCE

Main clause + dependent clause (implicit question): I don’t know who that is

Main clause + dependent clause (that): It’s possible (that) it will rain tomorrow

Main clause + dependent clause (adverbial*): I’ll only do it if I’m feeling well enough

**after, although, as, as soon as, because, before, even though, if, in order to, since, so that, though, unless, until, when, whereas, while*

Main clause + relative clause (relative pronoun*): It was Henry who ate all the cake

**where, which, who, whose*

Main clause + gerund phrase: Joe sat there quietly swinging his legs beneath his chair

MID-BRANCHING SENTENCE

Subject + dependent clause (adverbial) + verb + complement: The Hendersons, if they catch their flight, will arrive on Thursday afternoon

Subject + relative clause (relative pronoun) + verb + complement: The Hendersons, who liked to play tennis, watch films and travel through time, arrived on a Thursday afternoon

Subject + gerund phrase + verb + complement: The Hendersons, carrying the world on their shoulders, arrived on a Thursday afternoon



A sentence that is made up of two (or more) sentences connected together by a colon or conjunction with one (or more) of the sentences being a complex sentence.

COMPLEX SENTENCE + SIMPLE SENTENCE

Left-branching sentence + simple sentence: While they were waiting for the kettle to boil, they talked about the weather, but then they stopped

Mid-branching sentence + simple sentence: The Hendersons, who liked to play tennis, watch films and travel through time, arrived like a hurricane, and everyone else was blown out of sorts

Right-branching sentence + simple sentence: I'll only do it if I'm feeling well enough, and only know in the morning

SIMPLE SENTENCE + COMPLEX SENTENCE

Simple sentence + left-branching sentence: They hugged, and while they were waiting for the kettle to boil, they talked about the weather

Simple sentence + mid-branching sentence: The Joneses arrived quietly, but the Hendersons, who liked to play tennis, watch films and travel through time, arrived like a hurricane

Simple sentence + right-branching sentence: You're kind to worry, but I'll definitely do it if I'm feeling well enough

COMPLEX SENTENCE + COMPLEX SENTENCE

While they were waiting for the kettle to boil, they talked about the weather, but as soon as the tea had been poured, they turned to more serious things



ADDITIONAL STRUCTURES

Appositive phrases

A noun or noun phrase that immediately follows another noun or noun phrase in order to provide additional information.

Mid-branching: Jenny, a trainee nurse and part-time exorcist, was talking downing the street when the sky went dark

Right-branching: At the middle of it all was a child, a young boy of maybe ten years old

Lists

Nouns: In preparation for our holiday, we bought jackets, jumpers, t-shirts, socks, trousers, and matching pirate hats

Verbs: That evening we talked, smiled, laughed, drank, danced, sang, and forgot (for a little while at least) the troubles of the world

Verbal phrases (diazugma / multiple yoking): For example, "he bites his lip, and starts; stops on a sudden, looks upon the ground, then, lays his finger on his temple; straight, springs out into fast gait; then, stops again, strikes his breast hard." (William Shakespeare, Henry VIII)

Adverbs: She laughed loudly, joyfully, belligerently, meanly, and kept laughing until she was alone and the sky was ominously dark

Run-on sentences

Two independent sentences joined together without punctuation or using a so-called "comma splice."

I got up early it was sunny when I went outside the heat was fierce like a bull

Sentence fragments

A clause or group of words that doesn't form a grammatically complete sentence but is nonetheless self-contained between two full stops.

I looked out the window. Warily. The clouds were gathering. There are always clouds these days.

Tree-branch asides

An interruption in the prose to give additional information before returning to the interrupted idea or description.

Mrs Richardson—she was my next-door neighbour—smiled at me politely.



ENDNOTE

Bio:

This resource has been created by Matt Kendrick. Matt is a writer, editor and teacher based in the East Midlands, UK. His short fiction has been widely published both online and in print. He has been placed or listed in various writing competitions including Bath, Flash 500, the Oxford Flash Fiction Prize, Reflex and Leicester Writes. His work has been included on the Biffy 50 list for 2019-20, in Best Microfiction 2021, Best Small Fictions 2022 and the Wigleaf Top 50 list for 2022. He has also been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize.

Other Resources:

For links to other free resources, please visit my website: <https://www.mattkendrick.co.uk/resources>

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