

In this guide, we will look more closely at sentence structure. We will do this by:

- i. providing a definition of a sentence;
- ii. examining clauses and phrases, the building blocks of a sentence.

This guide will be useful to students looking to improve the clarity of their writing. Effective writing is successful because its points are made clearly, and the clarity of writing is shaped by the way sentences are put together and used. It is recommended that you use this guide with the related ones on *Academic Writing* and *Common writing errors*.

What is a sentence?

A sentence is a group of words that together express, for example, a statement, question or instruction. In terms of meaning, a sentence exists independently; in other words, it makes sense on its own. There are three main types of sentence: simple, compound and complex.

Simple sentence

A simple sentence contains only one clause:

The students were listening.

Compound sentence

A compound sentence, as its name suggests, includes two or more clauses:

The tutor was speaking but the students weren't listening.

As you can see in this example, the clauses are linked together by a conjunction, 'but'. Other conjunctions you might use include 'and', 'or' or 'then'.

Complex sentence

A complex sentence has a main clause, as in a simple sentence, followed by a subordinate clause:

The experiment failed because the methodology was flawed.

In this case, 'because', acting as a conjunction, introduces a subordinate ('the methodology was flawed'). This clause modifies or explains the main clause ('The experiment failed').

Clauses and phrases

As you can see the discussion above, clauses form the building blocks of sentences, and phrases are used to construct a clause.

Clauses

The most common clause you are likely to meet is the subordinate clause.

A subordinate clause depends on the main clause of a sentence (see the example of a simple sentence in the left-hand column).

For example:

After Michael had attended the meeting, he went to the coffee shop.

In this case, 'After Michael had attended the meeting' is the subordinate clause and 'he went to the coffee shop' is the main clause of the sentence.

There are two types of subordinate clauses:

- i. *conditional*
This is used when describing something that is a possibility; it often begins with 'if'.
- ii. *relative*
This is used to add extra information to the main clause; it usually begins with 'which' or 'that'.

Phrases

Phrases, as noted above, are parts of clauses; each phrase is built around a part of speech:

- noun ('a shelf of books')
- verb ('had been reading')
- adjective ('a stimulating study')
- adverbial ('very carefully')

Building sentences by thinking about clauses and their phrases will help you to sharpen meaning in your writing and give you a better understanding of the way written English works.

For more information about clauses and phrases, have a look at one of the writing resources we recommend at <http://study.cardiffmet.ac.uk>.