

# Building Better Sentences I

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“If you have not written much, I urge you to get started. A sharp pen reflects a sharp mind. ... Writing is not for the weak. The writer must form and then expose his or her ideas to public scrutiny. That takes confidence.”

– CNO Admiral John Richardson with Lieutenant Ashley O’Keefe  
[“Now Hear This - Read. Write. Fight.”](#)

**To become a better writer,  
write more. Really.**

When faced with a blank page, do you ever feel like this?



Photo by Peter Alfred Hess "Frustration," courtesy of Peter Alfred Hess on Flickr

# Or this?



Photo by Juliana D., courtesy of judacoregio on Flickr

Would you rather feel calm and confident, as if approaching a wide open sea of adventure?



When you face the blank page, feeling like you have to build something out of nothing is unnecessary and often immensely frustrating.

Instead, build your unique ideas into clear, concise writing by crafting sentences from available parts into standard forms.

# Roadmap for Building Better Sentences

- When to polish sentences, and how the GWC can help
- Define and review standard sentence structure
- Major Players (available parts and their purposes):
  - Specific subjects (the actors)
  - Active verbs (the actions)
  - Punctuation and other connectors
- Standard Sentence Forms (phrases and clauses)
- Passive / Active voice (faux news or energized reader?)
- Elimination of Fluff
- Questions and Exercises

# A sentence

expresses a complete idea,

contains at least one **subject** and at least one **verb**,

and ends with proper punctuation.

For example:

**I** **walk**. **Jane** **smiles**.

The **Navy** **sails**. The **Marine** **enlists**.

# SIMPLE SENTENCES

Often= S + V + Object

(ONE INDEPENDENT CLAUSE)

- The swimmers dove into the depths.
- The students consider their books.
- Traveling is good for the soul.



- *AVAILABLE PARTS –  
WORDS AND  
PUNCTUATION*

# Subject

- Often, a noun that takes *action*, *the actor*

**Chuck** runs every morning.

**Luck** led me to my future wife.

*\*Note above that morning and wife are also nouns but not the subject/actor of the sentence.*

Every morning **finds** Chuck running.

My future wife **found** me by luck.

*\*Changing the actor changes the meaning, even slightly.*

The **subject of a sentence** **is** usually a noun, pronoun, or gerund.

*\*Subjects can also be abstract nouns and even other parts of speech acting as nouns:*

**I** **walk** to the store.

**Peace** **is** the ultimate goal.

**Traveling** **creates** new thoughts.

**Happily** **is** an adverb.

*BBS TIP: Polish your sentences by choosing specific subjects rather than vague ones.*

- *There are* many important factors including writing for success in graduate school.
  - Among other tools, *writing* helps you achieve success in graduate school.
- *This is* a great workshop.
  - *Building Better Sentences* encourages me to take other workshops.
  - \*Notice how specific subjects allows you to include more details.

Avoid pronoun confusion.

Two men walked into a bar.

**He** ordered two shots of tequila  
and two beers.

*He whom?*

*When they get confused or question, readers lose track of what you are saying, a writer failing known as popping out the reader.*

# Workshop Practice

## Available Parts: Subject

- Add an abstract noun to the following sentence.
  - Today, \_\_\_\_\_ reigns.
- Add a proper noun to the following sentences.
  - Of the seven continents, \_\_\_\_\_ contains the most countries.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ presents the methodology of my thesis.
- Identify the subject in the following sentence.
  - On a hot day at the beach, the new recruits took a swim in the sea.

# Verbs (the actions)

\*English hinges on the energy of its verbs.

Verbs either state action

Hank sneezes.

Jim studies.

Jane throws a baseball.

or define a state of being.

Carla feels great.

Tim is comfortable in his new graduate program.

*BBS TIP: Choose active verbs that specifically address action of sentence.*

- *It is* very important that *we find* a way to examine our budget.
  - *This paper \_\_\_\_\_ DoD's cyber-security budget in order to highlight savings.*
- *So many great active verbs \_\_\_\_\_!*
  - *Optimize, explode, analyze, aggregate...*

Dive for the verb (the action).

- Some countries with a wealth of oil become poor.
- Some countries with a wealth of oil **become** poor.
- The consequences of the resource curse depend on the management of the increased revenue.
- The consequences of the resource curse **depend** on the management of the increased revenue.
- The oil market is a volatile market with frequent booms and busts.
- The oil market **is** a volatile market with frequent booms and busts.

BBS TIP: Identify auxiliary verbs, especially “to be” verbs, and ask yourself whether the sentence really needs the auxiliary verb.

On her way to work, Carla was walking.

YES (meaning): On her way to work, Carla was walking when she saw a deer.

NO (meaning) : Carla walked to work.

# List of Auxiliary Verbs

## "TO BE"

is, am, are, be, being, was, were, been

## OTHERS

can could

do does did

will would

have has had

may might must

shall should

# “TO BE” IS INHERENTLY PASSIVE

- Scour your work for “to be” verbs. Often they can be either deleted entirely or replaced with active verbs. Fascinatingly, they also often mark places where our thinking has yet to clarify.
  - There are many reasons to love.
    - Among many, three reasons to love include: love brings more love, love inherently feels better than scorn, and giving love often leaves us with no regrets, or at least fewer than projecting hate.

# *How Microsoft Word's Edit / Find can help you transform your sentences*

*Steps for your reference:*

*In Microsoft Word, click on Edit*

*Click on Find, then Find Replace*

*Search for one word at a time (was, were) and replace them with highlighted versions of themselves, repeat, then print and adjust accordingly.*

*Also, if you prefer to look at each on the screen, simply click Edit, Find, then examine each instance.*

Let's talk about the active voice.



Wait. Isn't the passive voice grammatically correct? Why do so many people dislike the passive voice?

*Savage Chickens*

by Doug Savage



# An important note on active and passive voice

- **Active**

**Congress passed the legislation.**

- **Passive**

**The legislation was passed by  
Congress.**

–  
Omitting subject of sentence, for better or worse, often obscures meaning and gives no responsibility

**Many people were killed.**

**By whom?**

Subject + Verb (+Object) where the subject is the actor = active voice. Is the actual actor the subject here?

- My brother was attacked by a herd of turkeys.
  - A herd of turkeys attacked my brother.
- The legislation was stalled by a group of lobbyists.
  - A group of lobbyists stalled the legislation.
- Clean air is necessary for people.
  - People need clean air.
- The door was locked by the murderer.
  - The murderer locked the door.
- Passive sentences were being used by the students.
  - The students used passive sentences.
- The executive order was signed by the president.
  - The president signed the executive order.
- The Nobel Prize was received by me.
  - I received the Nobel Prize.

The legislation that would save humanity was presented by the people. After six months of seeing no congressional action, the people were frustrated by the waiting. Toilet paper and rotten eggs were gathered by some of the people. The ensuing stench of Capitol Hill was documented by many people on Facebook.

The legislation that would save humanity was presented. After six months of seeing no congressional action, the people were frustrated. Toilet paper and rotten eggs were gathered. The ensuing stench of Capitol Hill was documented.

# Once you have a printed document, consider whether your paper could be hacked by zombies.

- **Can you add “by zombies” after the verb?**
  - If so, you likely have passive voice.
- The legislation that would save humanity was presented.
- The legislation that would save humanity was presented by zombies.
- After six months of seeing no congressional action, the people were frustrated.
- After six months of seeing no congressional action, the people were frustrated by zombies.
- Toilet paper and rotten eggs were gathered.
- Toilet paper and rotten eggs were gathered by zombies.
- The ensuing stench of Capitol Hill was documented.
- The ensuing stench of Capitol Hill was documented by many zombies on Facebook.

- The people presented legislation that would save humanity. After six months of seeing no congressional action, the waiting frustrated the people. Some of the people gathered toilet paper and rotten eggs. Many people documented the ensuing stench of Capitol Hill on Facebook.

- The students were challenged by the very idea of writing a thesis.
- *The very idea of writing a thesis challenged the students.*

- The thesis writing process is made easier by daily practice.
- *Daily practice makes the thesis writing process easier.*

# Ways to Eliminate To Be

- Write in active voice
  - Many people were killed. = Many people lived.
  - Many people were killed by the hackers' actions. = The hackers' actions resulted in three thousand physical injuries.
- Change unnecessary continuous tense to simple present or past tense
  - I am walking. = I walk / I walked.
- Replace with an active verb
  - Writing is hard. = Writing challenges writers.
- Revise the sentence(s)
  - It is important to consider the consequences of our words. Each day, people's words are changing the context of our world. = Our words can change world context.

# Punctuation

- Periods – full stop
- Commas – pause
- Semi-colons – hard pause, imply connection
- Question marks – encourage response

**If you are viewing these slides without the benefit of participating in the workshop, please make a coaching appointment to understand more about how punctuation influences readers.**

# Which text message are you more likely to respond to right away?

- How **are** you?
  - I hope you **are** well.
- The use of questions in writing **encourages** reader response. Like everything, **use** questions in moderation to provoke reader thought. Note, please **avoid** combining a statement with a question; the TPO **appreciates** that.
- Rather than: The question is: to text or not to text her?  
Write: I considered whether or not to text her. OR. I contemplated deeply into the night. Text her or not?

# SUBJECT, VERB, PUNCTUATION

- Now that we have the main available parts (subject, verb, and punctuation) down, let us see how to build those available parts into common sentence forms.

- *Carla's common sentence forms*



# SIMPLE SENTENCES

Often= S + V + Object

(ONE INDEPENDENT CLAUSE)

- The swimmers dove into the depths.
- The students consider their books.
- Traveling is good for the soul.

- *The key to understanding common sentence forms - which also helps greatly with avoiding fragments, run-ons, and comma errors - is to understand clauses. First, we need to understand that words get together in one of two ways.*

# Words party in either phrases or clauses!

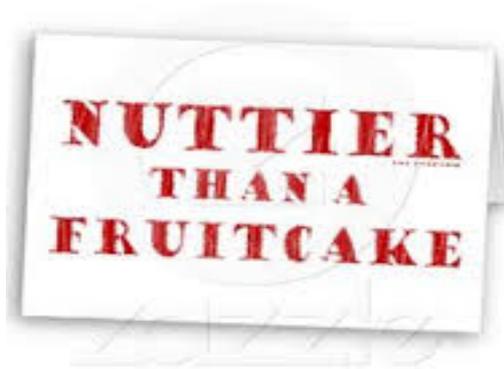
- PHRASES

- Two or more words without both a subject and a verb

- CLAUSES

- Two or more words WITH both a subject and a verb

# PHRASE EXAMPLES



on Tuesday  
in front of the school  
beautiful divinity  
amphibious warfare  
is considering

BETWEEN  
THE  
LINES

\*photo credit: <http://www.zazzle.com/nuttier+gifts>

\*\*photo credit: <http://www.pinkandgreene.com/nuttier-than-a-fruitcake.htmlake.html>

# TIP: Please avoid stacking excessive multiple prepositional phrases at the end of sentences. Snore...

\*I sprint. (Clear)

\*I sprint across base. (Still clear)

I sprint in the evening across base over the river through the trees into the sea hidden by the night.

(Who remembers that you were sprinting? Readers are all either confused or asleep by now.)

\*The chapter analyzes the data.

\*The chapter analyzes the data about cyber-attacks.

\*The chapter analyzes the data about cyber-attacks on the U.S. in the private sector by China in the last ten years.

preposition

noun

from

Paris

# List of Common Prepositions

about	by	outside	according to
above	down	over	because of
across	during	since	by way of
after	except	through	in addition to
against	for	throughout	in front of
around	from	till	in place of
at	in	to	in regard to
before	inside	toward	in spite of
behind	into	under	instead of
below	like	until	on account of
beneath	near	up	out of
beside	of	upon	
besides	off	with	
between	on	without	
beyond	out		

# CLAUSES – the best key to understanding grammatically correct sentences

- **CLAUSE** – group of two or more words with both subject and verb

## TWO TYPES OF CLAUSES

- **DEPENDENT CLAUSE (DC)** (Like a dependent person, a DC cannot stand on its own.)
- **INDEPENDENT CLAUSE (IC)** (Like an independent person, an IC can stand on its own.)

- *I walk.* (IC)
- *Jane sprints.* (IC)
- *The puppy grows up to be a dog.* (IC)
  
- *When I find my way* (DC)
- *Although Joe stared at the sea* (DC)

# DEPENDENT CLAUSES

- Remember, dependent clauses are still clauses! They still contain a subject and a verb. They are independent clauses with a **subordinating conjunction (dependent marker word)** in front. They cannot stand on their own. It's like adding too much liquor to a usually competent person. They can no longer stand on their own.

# Subordinating Conjunctions / Dependent Marker Words

- According to Purdue's OWL site, "some common dependent markers are: after, although, as, as if, because, before, even if, even though, if, in order to, since, though, unless, until, whatever, when, whenever, whether, while."\*

\*<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/598/01/>

# Dependent clause examples:

- When I walk to the store
- because Jane sprinted down the hill
- after the Admiral wrote his article
- although the student completed her thesis
- whatever you might think

# Carla's Common Sentence Forms

- IC.
  - Intro word or phrase, IC.
- IC, conjunction IC.
  
- DC, IC.
- IC DC.
  
- IC; IC.
- IC; word or phrase, IC.
- IC; DC, IC.

\*\*\* IC, appositive phrase.

# Common Sentence Forms

- IC.
  - I walk.
  - She walks to the store.
  - The United States Navy optimizes defense.
  - The United States Navy and the Marine Corps work together and find ways to optimize defense.

**Note: Word or phrase, IC = still all one IC**

- Tomorrow, I walk to the store.
- In the heat of the moment, she exercises patience.

# Combining a DC with an IC – two forms

- DC, IC.
    - When **I woke** up today, **I smelled** coffee.
    - Because **we signed** the treaty, **peace lasted** for 1400 years.
  - IC DC. (no comma)
    - **I smelled** coffee when **I woke** up today.
    - **Peace lasted** for 1400 years because **we signed** the treaty.
- \*Decide which to use by what comes before and after.

# Basic Conjunctions

*for* (in the sense of "because")

*and*      *nor*      *but*      *or*      *yet*      *so*

**FANBOYS**

The renovation was not completed, \_\_ the manager allowed the tenants to move in.

Writing thank-you notes is something neither of us enjoys, \_\_ is the effort even worthwhile . . .

**Choice of conjunction shades the meaning**

# IC, conjunction IC.

- She walks to the store, and she buys bread.
- Jane walks to the store, but she can't find bread.
- Hungry, Joe walks to the store, so he can buy bread.
- Fred walks to the store, or he runs.
- Fred runs to the store, yet he can't find bread.

# A note on spotting the **second subject** and conjunctions

- **Correct:**

- The boy walked to the store, and **he** bought bread.
- The chapter presents the results of the SWOT analysis, and the chapter demonstrates the need for flexibility with cyber.
- The boy walked to the store and bought bread.

**Incorrect** (no second subject so no comma needed):

The boy walked to the store, and bought bread.  
The chapter presents the results of the SWOT analysis, and demonstrates the need for flexibility with cyber.

# IC; IC.

- Like anything that's best utilized in moderation, semi-colons can work really nicely to demonstrate connection between ideas; however, please use correctly. Incorrectly used semi-colons stand out like red flags, confusing / irritating the reader.
  - Adorable, the puppy video went viral; four million people watched it in three hours. (correct)

# TWO CORRECT USES OF SEMI-COLONS

- Separating two independent clauses
- Separating items in a list that already contain commas
  - United States capital cities include: Carson City, Nevada; Sacramento, California; and Lansing, Michigan.

# IC; word or phrase, IC.

- I love Fridays; **tomorrow**, I plan on walking by the ocean.
- The puppy video went viral; **by the end of the day**, four million people watched it.

# Conjunctive Adverbs

*Accordingly*

***Also***

*Alternatively*

*Anyway*

***Besides***

*Certainly*

*Consequently*

*Conversely*

*Contrarily*

*Elsewhere*

*Finally*

***Furthermore***

*Hence* (no comma needed)

*Henceforth*

*However*

*Incidentally*

*Indeed*

*Instead*

***Likewise***

*Meanwhile*

***Moreover***

*Namely*

*Nevertheless*

*Next*

*Nonetheless*

*Now* (no comma needed)

*Otherwise*

***Similarly***

*Simultaneously*

*Specifically*

*Still*

*Subsequently*

*Then*

***Therefore***

*Thus* (no comma needed)

*Ultimately*

**RED** words are used in place of “AND”—but no two have exactly the same meaning.

Col. Stewart demonstrated a series of complicated exercises for the group. \_\_\_\_\_, he did not expect them to become fully proficient at them without practicing at home.

*Certainly, However, Incidentally, Indeed, Moreover, Nevertheless, Nonetheless, Simultaneously, Still, Ultimately,*

Arabic is considered one of the most difficult languages to learn well; \_\_\_\_\_, Spencer decided to set aside all his other obligations and work full-time on it.

*accordingly, consequently, finally, hence, however, indeed, therefore, thus, ultimately,*

Sue made a poor grade on her midterm exam. She is determined, \_\_\_\_\_, to do better.

*accordingly, certainly, consequently, finally, henceforth, indeed, nevertheless, nonetheless, now, therefore, thus, ultimately,*

# IC; DC, IC.

- Planning ahead for my paper, I brainstormed several ideas; **after I finish my first draft**, I have a writing coach appointment to discuss organization.

# Application of Knowledge



Are the commas here properly connecting two independent clauses (ICs)?

- I walked to the ocean, I realized that it was going to rain.
  - No
    - A comma alone between two ICs makes a run-on sentence, known as a comma splice. One fix: I walked to the ocean, and I realized it was going to rain. (Comma and coordinating conjunction holding two ICs together). Another fix: I walked to the ocean and realized it was going to rain. (all one IC)
- I chose a thesis topic that interested me, so I enjoyed writing it.
  - Yes.
    - A comma and “so,” one of the coordinating conjunctions, properly connects these two ICs.

# Are the commas here proper?

- I do not know what to write for my thesis, or how to write it.
  - No.
    - Make sure a second subject and second verb exists. Here, the comma splits one IC unnecessarily. One fix: I do not know what to write for my thesis or how to write it. Another fix: I do not know what to write for my thesis, and I do not know how to write it.
- Chapter II reviewed literature applicable to China U.S. historical relations as well as recent cyber-events, because the China U.S. cyber agreement is so recent that not much data exists.
  - No.
    - "Because" is a subordinating conjunction (a dependent marker word) like after, when, and while, so this sentence is actually an IC DC, requiring no comma. Easiest fix is to remove the comma. You might also put the DC starting with because at the beginning depending on the context.

What about semi-colons connecting two ICs?

- I walked to the ocean; I realized that it was going to rain.
  - Yes.
    - A semi-colon alone can connect two ICs.
- I attended the security training; and I enjoyed it.
  - No.
    - Putting “and,” or any coordinating conjunction after a semi-colon makes the second part not a complete sentence. If I start talking and say to you “and I enjoyed it,” you are likely to wonder what I enjoyed. A semi-colon connects only two ICs (or complete sentences).

# CONCISION: verb dive, subject hunt

- What can you cut?
  - There exist many reasons that democracy is important. I think that democracy is important because it helps us realize that people are equal. The idea of democracy means that everyone has an equal say. The Rule of Law is supported by democracy. Democracy is around to make sure that everyone can vote. This means that democracy is important for a lot of reasons.

# CONCISION: verb dive, subject hunt

- What can you cut?
  - There **exist** many reasons that democracy **is** important. I **think** that democracy **is** important because it **helps** us realize that people **are** equal. The idea of democracy **means** that everyone **has** an equal say. The Rule of Law **is** supported by democracy. Democracy **is** around to make sure that everyone **can vote**. This **means** that democracy **is** important for a lot of reasons.

# CONCISION: verb dive, subject hunt

- What can you cut?
  - There exist many reasons that democracy is important. I think that democracy is important because it helps us realize that people are equal. The idea of democracy means that everyone has an equal say. The Rule of Law is supported by democracy. Democracy is around to make sure that everyone can vote. This means that democracy is important for a lot of reasons.

# CONCISION: identify clauses

- What can you cut?
  - There exist many reasons that democracy is important. I think that democracy is important because it helps us realize that people are equal. The idea of democracy means that everyone has an equal say. The Rule of Law is supported by democracy. Democracy is around to make sure that everyone can vote. This means that democracy is important for a lot of reasons.

# CONCISION: list separately

- What can you cut?
  - There exist many reasons (THERE / EXIST)
  - that democracy is important. (DEMOCRACY IS)
  - I think (I THINK)
  - that democracy is important (DEMOCRACY / IS)
  - because it helps us realize (IT /HELPS)
  - that people are equal. (PEOPLE / ARE)
  - The idea of democracy means (IDEA / MEANS)
  - that everyone has an equal say. (EVERYONE / HAS)
  - The Rule of Law is supported by Democracy. (RULE OF LAW/ IS)
  - Democracy is around to make sure (DEMOCRACY / IS)
  - that everyone can vote. (EVERYONE / CAN VOTE)
  - This means (THIS / MEANS)
  - that democracy is important for a lot of reasons. (DEMOCRACY / IS)

# CONCISION: list separately

- What are the subjects and verbs here?
  - THERE / EXIST
  - DEMOCRACY / IS
  - I THINK
  - DEMOCRACY / IS
  - IT /HELPS
  - PEOPLE / ARE
  - IDEA / MEANS
  - EVERYONE / HAS
  - RULE OF LAW/ IS
  - DEMOCRACY / IS
  - EVERYONE / CAN VOTE
  - THIS / MEANS
  - DEMOCRACY / IS
- **Are there any important words not currently acting as subjects or verbs?**
  - Important, equal, support

# CONCISION: list separately

- What are the most important ideas here?
- Using some or all of the words below, write one or two concise, clear sentences that express the same idea as original paragraph. Add a specific subject, active verb, conjunction, adverb, or adjective as truly needed.
  - DEMOCRACY
  - IMPORTANT
  - HELPS
  - PEOPLE
  - EVERYONE
  - EQUAL
  - SUPPORT
  - RULE OF LAW
  - EVERYONE
  - VOTE

- ~~There are many reasons democracy is important. I think democracy is important because it helps us realize that people are equal. The idea of democracy means that everyone has~~ **ve** ~~an equal say. and~~ **supports the** ~~Rule of Law is supported by democracy. Democracy is around to make sure everyone can vote. This means that democracy is important for a lot of reasons.~~
- Democracy helps everyone have an equal say, supports the Rule of Law, and ensures everyone can vote.

# You could do all that, or...

- You could follow these simple tips:
  - Choose specific subjects
  - Choose active verbs
  - Eliminate the passive voice
  - Revise and combine sentences to cut fluff
  - Revise thesis and topic sentences
  - Observe correct grammar
  - Use conjunctive adverbs, semi-colons, and other connectors properly so that your structure creates flow and persuasion.

What are some basic ways to cut the fluff?



- Revise to a specific subject (to specify the actor)
  - There exist four ways to resolve conflict.
  - **Four ways to resolve conflict include:**
- Revise to a more energetic, exact verb (to describe the action)
  - Writing papers is something that requires planning.
  - **Writing papers requires planning.**
- Eliminate the passive voice
  - The passive voice was taught to me by my second grade teacher.
  - **My second grade teacher taught me to use the passive voice.**
- Eliminate mentions of “I think” “I believe” “it is important ...”
  - I think conflict teaches us lessons about ourselves.
  - **Conflict teaches us lessons about ourselves.**
- Combine sentences to simply make your point rather than introducing it first
  - I believe it is important to consider strategy before engaging in war. Considering strategy first produces more effective tactics.
  - **Considering strategy before engaging in war produces more effective tactics.**

# Sentence Exercises

A scenic coastal landscape with a blue sky, white clouds, a dark mountain, and a rocky coastline with waves crashing against the shore. The text "Sentence Exercises" is overlaid in white on the upper part of the image.