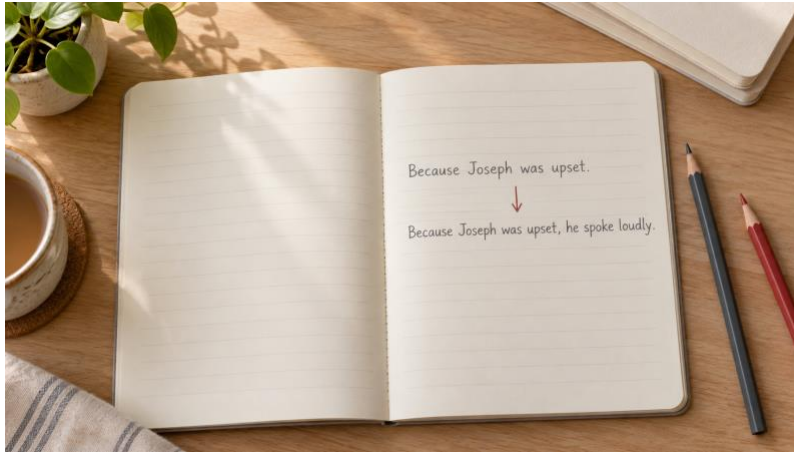




Is This a Complete Sentence?

In “How a Sentence Grows,” we began with two words: *Joseph talked*. The sentence is short, but it has what it needs—a subject (*Joseph*) and a verb (*talked*) that express a complete thought.

A **sentence fragment** looks like a sentence because it begins with a capital letter and ends with punctuation. Yet something essential is missing.

Find the missing piece

A fragment may lack a subject:

Walked into the room.

Who walked in? Add a subject: “Joseph walked into the room.”

It may lack a complete verb:

Joseph in the doorway.

What did Joseph do? “Joseph stood in the doorway” completes the thought.

Or it may have a subject and verb but still depend on another sentence:

Because Joseph was upset.

The word *because* leaves us waiting to hear what happened. We can join the fragment to a complete thought: “Because Joseph was upset, he spoke loudly.”

Ask three questions

When a sentence seems unfinished, check it in this order:

- 1 **Who or what is it about?** Find the subject.
- 2 **What happens, or what is true?** Find the main verb.
- 3 **Can it stand alone?** Words such as *because*, *although*, and *when* may turn an otherwise complete thought into a dependent clause.

Do not judge by length. “Stop!” is a complete sentence: the subject *you* is understood. “The student who finished every assignment before Friday,” despite its length, is a fragment until we learn what that student did.

When a fragment earns its place

Writers sometimes use a fragment deliberately for emphasis: Joseph opened the letter. No apology. Not a single word.

No apology and *Not a single word* are fragments. Their meaning is clear because the first sentence supplies the context. The short, abrupt pieces also help us feel Joseph’s disappointment. Combining everything into one grammatical sentence would change the rhythm and soften the effect.

That freedom calls for judgment. In a story, essay, or informal article, a well-placed fragment can give an important moment weight. In academic or professional writing, complete sentences are usually the safer choice. Either way, know *why* you are using a fragment.

The final check

If a fragment is accidental, add what is missing or attach it to the sentence it depends on. If it is intentional, read the passage aloud. Does the fragment sharpen the meaning? Will a reader understand it immediately? If so, it may be doing its job.

Watch for the opposite problem, too: a **run-on sentence** joins two complete thoughts without the punctuation or connecting word they need.

Run-on: Joseph talked loudly everyone listened.

Fixed: Joseph talked loudly, and everyone listened.

Each half could stand alone as a sentence. You could also separate them with a period or semicolon. The test is whether your reader can see where one thought ends and the next begins.

For more examples, see Purdue OWL’s guides to [sentence fragments](#) and [run-on sentences](#).