

# SENTENCE STRUCTURE

## ■ Simple Sentences

A simple sentence can be two words, twenty, or more. It just has to have a **verb** (an action, or being, or possessing) and a **subject** (something or someone that's doing the verb). Each of the following is a complete simple sentence, also called an "independent clause":

The cat fell.

"The cat" (subject) + "fell" (action verb)

I am.

"I" (subject)+ "am" (being verb)

Kelly has it.

"Kelly" (subject)+ "has" (possessing verb)+ "it" (what she has)

My roommate Kelly has the book the teacher recommended on her desk.

"Kelly" (subject)+ "has" (possessing verb)+ "it" (what she has)

A simple sentence can have two subjects doing the verb, two verbs being done by the subject, or both. No commas separate these elements.

**Randy** and **Kim** moved pipe last summer.

Randy **moved pipe** and **drove a truck** last summer.

Randy and Kim moved pipe and drove a truck last summer.

## ■ Compound Sentences

Two simple sentences can be put together with a semicolon

Randy moved pipe last summer; Kim drove a truck.

or with a comma before one of the following words: **and, but, so, or, for, nor, yet.**

Randy moved pipe last summer, **but** Kim drove a truck.

A sentence with two properly connected independent clauses is called a "compound sentence." **If the clauses are not properly connected, however, a compound sentence can easily become a run-on sentence, and must be rewritten:**

**(wrong)** Randy moved pipe last summer Kim drove a truck. (no connector at all)

**(wrong)** Randy moved pipe last summer, Kim drove a truck. (comma only)

**(wrong)** Randy moved pipe last summer, and Kim drove a truck, but Casey worked in Alaska. (too many clauses connected with **but** or **and**).

## ■ Complex Sentences

Many other groups of words, however, cannot stand alone as independent clauses. The minute a simple sentence or its verb is preceded by a word like **as, if, who, when, because, or that**, it stops being independent and can no longer stand by itself as a sentence.

**Because** Randy moved pipe last summer... (what happened as a result?)

Randy, **who** moved pipe last summer... (what about him?)

Other groups of words that can't stand alone will start with what looks like a verb but isn't acting as one--even though it may begin with **to** or end in **-ing** or **-ed**.

<b>To keep up</b> with the rest of the class	(who should do what to make this happen?)
<b>Knowing</b> that spring was coming	(who knows it, and what are they doing with this knowledge?)
<b>Exhausted</b> by the night of cramming	(who crammed, and what happened because they were exhausted?)

You can tell that these are not ordinary verbs because you can't make a full sentence even by putting a subject with them:

To keep up with the rest of the class, Alex	(What did Alex do to keep up?)
Alex, knowing that spring was coming,	(What did Alex do to prepare?)
Alex, exhausted by the night of cramming,	(What happened to Alex?)

When a group of words cannot stand alone as a sentence, it has to be connected to an independent clause--usually with a comma. A sentence that combines an independent clause and a dependent clause is called a "complex sentence."

When Randy moved pipe last summer, Kim drove a truck.  
Randy moved pipe last summer, because Kim drove a truck.  
Knowing that spring was coming, Alex ordered seeds.  
Alex fell asleep, exhausted by the long night of cramming.

**If a group of words that can't stand alone is not connected to an independent clause, it becomes a "sentence fragment." Rewrite it or use a comma to connect it to the sentence before or after it.**

## ■ Compound-Complex Sentences

Long sentences often combine several dependent and independent clauses. The clauses are combined according to the same rules that apply to compound and complex sentences.

While Randy moved pipe last summer, Kim drove a truck; Casey worked in Alaska.  
Randy moved pipe last summer, and Kim drove a truck; Casey worked in Alaska, saving money for school.  
Randy moved pipe last summer, saving money for school, while Kim drove a truck; Casey worked in Alaska, canning fish.  
Randy moved pipe last summer, saving money for school, while Kim drove a truck; Casey, who was saving for a car as well as tuition, worked in Alaska, canning fish.