



Quick Guide to Sentence Structure

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The MWC is a Writing Across the Curriculum initiative serving Northwest Vista College students, faculty, and the community through tutoring in writing skills, critical thinking, and building writing pedagogy. Effective writing is a cornerstone of education.

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A proper sentence can be the hardest and easiest thing to construct. It depends on your level of comfort with writing. With practice, constructing a sentence can become one of the easiest parts of a paper. A sentence is the most essential element of any writing. Some sentences can be as small as one word while others can be extensive. However, in terms of academic writing, it will be very rare that one-word sentences will come into use.

For clarity's sake, understand all of the following rules are directed to and intended for academic writing. Some rules are given some leniency for personal writing and creative writing. However, unless otherwise advised by your instructor, it is best to stick with these rules at all times.

BASICS:

Sentences have four basic rules that must be followed, provided by Ellis:

Capitalize the first letter of the first word in a sentence.

End a sentence with a period, question mark, exclamation point, or quotation marks.

Most of the time, the subject of the sentence comes first, the verb comes second, and the objects come last. (Subject -> Verb -> Object)

If the subject is singular, the verb must also be singular. If the subject is plural, the verb must be plural. This is known as subject-verb agreement

Capitalizing the first letter is a fixed rule. No exceptions.

CORRECT: We are going to the store.

INCORRECT: we are going to the store.

Ending sentences with a punctuation (i.e. period or question mark) is another fixed rule. No exceptions.

CORRECT: Sentence punctuation is important. Do you know why? It is because it makes the sentences clear!

INCORRECT: Sentence punctuation is important do you know why it is because it makes the sentences clear

“Every sentence requires at least a verb and a subject; a verb is an action, and a subject is the noun that does the action” (Ellis).

EXAMPLE: We are going to the store.

In the example, “We” are the subject. “Are going” is the action.

EXAMPLE: The dog ate steak.

In the example, “dog” is the subject, and “ate” is the action.

Both examples contain a direct object, which is “the noun that receives the action” (Ellis). In the first example, “store” is receiving the action of “are going”, and, in the second example, “steak” receives the action of “ate.”

Always only put one (1) space between the end of each sentence and in-between each word. The simple reason for this is it keeps your draft neat and clean. Also, adding extra spaces will give the impression to the professors that you’re trying to inflate your paper to make it seem longer.

CORRECT: I will be a great writer. I am a great student.

INCORRECT: I will be a great writer. I am a great student.

COMMAS:

Commas are a very tricky tool. The usage of commas is whereas “a period ends a sentence, a comma indicates a smaller break” (“Rules for Using Commas”).

While there are many areas and situations to which commas are required, we will only focus on two of the most common instances of comma usage.

“Rules for Using Commas” lists two uses of commas as “Separating items in a list of three or more” and “Connecting two independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction”.

Here are examples of lists that needs commas:

I love to watch anime, wrestling, and cartoons.

I love to watch anime, wrestling and cartoons.

I drove to the store, washed the car, and cut the lawn.

I drove to the store, washed the car and cut the lawn.

The sentences where the comma is missing before the word “and” follow the rule of the Oxford comma. The rule of the Oxford comma is “the final comma—the one that comes before the *and*—is optional.” In the case of the Oxford comma, it is usually safer to add it in. However, some instructors wish it to be left out.

Connecting two independent clauses is a clause in a sentence that can stand on a sentence on its own.

Examples of a sentence with two independent clauses and a proper use of a comma are as follows:

I went to the movies, and I drove to the grocery store.

I cleaned out the garage, and I cut the grass.

Some sentences have an independent clause and a dependent clause. In those cases, a comma would not be inserted.

I went to the movies and drove to the grocery store.

I cleaned out the garage and cut the grass.

There are many other comma rules, but these are the most common instances that are encountered in academic writing. Comma rules are varied and numerous, but do not get discouraged. You will get better with practice.

A good technique to learn is, if you're reading a sentence and find you need to take a breath, the sentence may require a comma (,), a semicolon (;), or a colon (:). The sentence may also need to end, via a period (.), a question mark (?), or an exclamation point (!).

Works Cited:

Ellis, Matt. "Sentence Structure: Learn the Rules for Every Sentence Type." *Grammarly*. 29 June 2023. <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/sentence-structure/>. Accessed 7 August 2023.

"Rules for Using Commas." *Grammarly*. 1 July 2023. <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/comma/>. Accessed 8 August 2023.