# UNDERSTANDING SENTENCE STRUCTURE

**By the end of this lesson you should be able to:**

* Recall the different types of sentences.
* Understand the difference between a subject and a predicate.
* Be able to create a simple, complex and compound sentences.

**Introduction**

In order to write good sentences, it is important to understand the foundations of sentence structure and the different types of sentence structures. As you may remember, the lesson plan *Types of Sentences* covered the different types of sentences; and now we will look at how to structure a sentence. This lesson plan will help you alternate the ways in which you write sentences so that your writing style is not filled with redundant sentences. Having a good mix of simple and complex sentences will keep your reader engaged with the material. This technique is also best learned if you read different works. So remember to read as much as you can, then your writing will improve.

Quick recap! There are four types of sentences: ***declarative, interrogative****,* ***imperative***and***exclamatory***. Declarative sentences express a statement or fact. Interrogative sentences ask a question. Imperative sentences give commands and requests. Exclamatory sentences express emotion.

**Sentence Structure Part 1:**

**1. Subjects and Predicates**

**All sentences must contain a subject and a predicate.**

* The subject tells us who or what is doing the action, and is either a noun or pronoun.
* The predicate tells us what the subject is doing (or being). At the heart of the predicate is a verb (action or being word).

Subjects and predicates can vary along a continuum from very short and simple, to rather complicated.

At the simplest level, a subject can be just one word, and a predicate can be just one word (as long as it is a verb).

For example:

UCT rocks! **UCT** = noun = subject; **rocks** = verb = predicate

I know. **I** = pronoun = subject; **know** = verb = predicate

Sometimes the predicate contains not only an action, but also someone or something to whom the action is done. The recipient of the action is called the **object** of the sentence. The object is part of the predicate.

Example:

I love you.

**I** = subject; **love** = verb; **you** = object

Subject Predicate

She does not eat meat.

**She** = subject; **does not eat** = verb;  **meat** = object

Subject Predicate

We could say more about objects, but for now, you just need to know that a sentence may or may not have one.

**1.1. Simple subjects and predicates**

A simple subject is the **main** noun or pronoun that tells us what the sentence is about. In addition to the simple subject, there can be other words that tell us what the sentence is about. These words, together with the subject, make up the *complete subject*. Sometimes, the simple subjectis also the complete subject*.*

**Example:A glass of water can satisfy my thirst**.

In this example, ***glass*** is the simple subject. It is the main word that the sentence is built around. ***A glass of water*** is the complete subject of the sentence since it consists of all the words that tell us what the sentence is about.

In the same way, the simple predicate (or verb)is the **main** word or group of words that tell us something about the subject. A *complete predicate* is made up of the verb and all the words that modify it or are related to it (e.g. the object, if there is one).

**Example: A glass of water can satisfy my thirst.**

The simple predicate of this sentence is ***can satisfy*** as this is the verb; and ***can satisfy my thirst*** makes up the complete predicate.

ACTIVITY

Draw two vertical lines between the *complete subject* and the *complete predicate* in the following sentences. Then circle the ***simple subject*** and underline the ***simple predicate***.

Example:

*with well-rounded CV’s find it easier to get jobs after graduating.*

1. My sister has gone to Johannesburg.
2. That big red door leads to my bedroom.
3. David’s mother is an excellent cook.
4. One view of globalization suggests that it is biased in favour of cooperation and harmony.
5. Authority can most simply be defined as ‘legitimate power’.
6. Aristotle was a student of Plato.
7. His major work, *The Prince*, was published in 1531.
8. A form of government can thus be identified in almost all social institutions.
9. Concepts, models and theories are the tools of political analysis.
10. The classification of political systems serves two purposes.

[Sentences from number four – number ten taken from: Heywood, A. 2007. *Politics* (3rd ed), Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.]

**Sentence Structure Part 2:**

**2. Main and subordinate clauses**

If a statement has a subject and a verb, does that automatically make it a complete sentence?

NO.

It is a sentence only if it can stand on its own as a complete thought. It has a subject and a verb, AND it makes perfect sense.

Often we want to add some additional information to our initial “complete thought”. Sometimes this takes the form of adding in an extra part to the sentence which also contains a subject and verb – but which cannot stand on its own.

For example:

The audience was riveted until the curtain fell on the last act.

The sentence started off as “The audience was riveted.” That is a complete thought. We then added in some information about the duration of the audience’s rapt attention: “…until the curtain fell on the last act”.

This additional section answers the question: “For how long was the audience riveted?” It has a subject (the curtain) and a predicate (fell on the last act). But it cannot stand on its own as a sentence. **“Until the curtain fell on the last act” is not a complete thought.** Something is missing.

We call these two parts of the sentence the main (or independent) clause and the subordinate (or dependent) clause.

The main clause can stand on its own. It is the core of the sentence, carrying the most important information.

The subordinate clause cannot stand on its own. It depends on the main clause for its meaning, and its purpose is to tell us more about the main clause. It does not have a life of its own.

A subordinate clause starts with, and is linked to the main clause with, a subordinating conjunction or a relative pronoun.

Here are some subordinating conjunctions (not a complete list):

after, before, since, until, whenever, while, because, although, even if, so that, rather than, unless, whereas, whether, why

Here are the relative pronouns:

who, whose, whom, whoever, whomever, whosoever, that, which, whichever

**Examples**:

*Politicians start visiting the townships and kissing babies whenever election time rolls around.*

Main clause: *Politicians start visiting the townships and kissing babies*

Subordinate clause: *whenever election time rolls around.*

Subordinating conjunction: *whenever*

*Unless socio-economic inequality is reduced, South Africa will always be plagued by crime.*

Main clause: *South Africa will always be plagued by crime*

Subordinate clause: *Unless socio-economic inequality is reduced*

Subordinating conjunction: *Unless*

*The poorest people in society often continue to vote for political parties whose policies have brought them no real benefits.*

Main clause: *The poorest people in society often vote for political parties*

Subordinate clause: *whose policies have brought them no real benefits*

Relative pronouns: *Whose*

Note that a subordinate clause can appear at the start of a sentence, or later on. The position of a clause in a sentence does **not** indicate whether it is the main clause or a subordinate clause.

**3. Sentence Structure**

**Part 3: Types of sentence structure**

There are four basic types of sentence structures:

* 1. **Simple**: A simple sentence consists of a ***subject*** and a ***predicate***. This kind of sentence is easy to write and understand. However, be careful not to use **only** simple sentences as this can make your writing choppy.
* Example: He plays soccer every weekend.
  1. **Compound**: A compound sentence is made up of two simple sentences which are joined together by a coordinating conjunction. A coordinating conjunction connects two or more **equal** parts together. There are seven coordinating conjunctions: *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.*
* Example: He plays soccer every weekend, **yet** he prefers rugby.

In this example, the two sentences that are being connected to each other are of **equal importance** within the compound sentence.

* 1. **Complex**: A complex sentence is made up of a ***main clause*** and at least one ***subordinate clause***.

Example: She went to bed after she had finished the assignment.

She went to bed = main clause; after she had finished the assignment = subordinate clause

“After she had finished the assignment” cannot stand on its own. **It is not a complete thought.** When you read a subordinate clause, you are always left with an unanswered question. In this case, you want to ask, “Well, *then what*?” The main clause is designed to answer these questions and completes the thought of the subordinate clause.

* 1. **Compound-Complex**: A compound-complex sentence combines a complex sentence with a simple sentence.
* Example: Since I arrived late, I was unable to attend the ceremony, but I did not miss the reception.

Sentence 1: Since I arrived late (dependent clause), I was unable to attend the ceremony (independent clause). Sentence 2: I did not miss the reception.

The conjunction “but” links sentence two to sentence one.

**Activity 1**

Read the following sentences. In the space provided, say what type of sentence structure each is using and explain your choice. Where applicable, identify the dependent and independent clauses.

1. Individualism is the core principle of liberal ideology.

1. Ideology is one of the most controversial concepts in political analysis.
2. The principal neoliberal goal is to ‘roll back the frontiers of the state’ because of the belief that unregulated market capitalism will deliver efficiency and growth.

1. Marx proclaimed that the proletarian revolution was inevitable, and he predicted that it would occur through a spontaneous uprising.

1. Although hard and soft power often operate together, soft power can reduce the need for hard power, and it can operate in the absence of hard power.

The above sentences are taken from: Heywood, A. 2007. *Politics* (3rd ed), Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

**Activity 2: Writing Exercise**

From the list below, pick a topic and write a simple, compound, complex and compound-complex sentence. You can only use the topic once and must write one of the four types of sentences.

politics legitimacy development authoritarianism

1. Simple
2. Compound
3. Complex
4. Compound-complex