Unit 3: Sentence Fragments

Units 3, 4, and 5 provide strategies for and practice with identifying complete sentences and fixing the most common sentence problems: fragments and run-ons. Unit 3 focuses on identifying and correcting sentence fragments.

Definition: Sentence fragments are incomplete thoughts that have been punctuated as if they were sentences.

Example: A sentence like this one, for example.

Teaching Tips

- Students often find it difficult to recognize fragments and thus to eliminate them from their writing. Why? They are assailed with fragments every day—when they think, when they converse, when they write dialogue, and even when they read.

  Expert writers use fragments to fit their style and the occasion. If students are to use fragments effectively in their writing, then first they need to be able to distinguish between fragments and complete thoughts.

- The example above illustrates the most common fragment error: An incomplete thought that is really an extension of a preceding thought is punctuated as if it were a separate sentence. These mistakes often occur in explanations and examples.

  The easiest way to correct this kind of error is simply to attach the offending fragment to the sentence before it by removing the preceding period, adding a comma (if necessary), and changing the uppercase letter to lowercase. Alternatively, you can turn the fragment into a sentence by adding a subject or other needed words.

  Sentence with fragment: I always admired Gandhi. The great Indian leader.

  Correction: I always admired Gandhi, the great Indian leader.

  Alternative: I always admired Gandhi. He was a great Indian leader.

- Students also can be reassured that fragments in quoted dialogue are perfectly correct since we we often leave out words when we speak.

Mini-Lesson

Since students experience the most trouble identifying sentence fragments when the fragments are combined with a related thought, exercises should include the complete thoughts that set up and mask the fragments as well as the fragments themselves.

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