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Part One
Writing Correctly
This is the chapter you are most likely to skip. The fact that you have bought or borrowed this book shows that you want to improve your writing skills, but the likelihood is that you are looking for advice on how to fine-tune your performance or perhaps for a ‘quick-fix’ solution to a problem. The chances are that you do not want to waste your time reading about something as elementary as ‘a sentence’. Our experience as teachers in a university, however, where students might be expected to be competent writers, has shown us that the most common weakness in students’ writing is the inability to generate sentences that are not only readable and understandable but also grammatically correct in a conventional, formal sense. This is not a new problem: people have always had difficulties handling the basic mechanics of sentences. Part of the reason for this may lie in the sort of technical vocabulary sometimes used to explain the mechanics of language, which can be off-putting, although the number of technical terms you actually need to know is small. The good news, however, is that once the basics of sentence construction are grasped, everything else will fall into place. This is because the sentence is the basis of essay writing. Indeed, the main thing students need to know is how to construct grammatical sentences. Fortunately, this is a skill that is easy to acquire, especially if you read this chapter. Please, therefore, do not skip this chapter. On the contrary, if you are only going to read one chapter of this book, make sure it is this one.

**Producing ‘correct’ sentences**

The essential skill in writing is the ability to generate a ‘correct’ sentence, followed by another ‘correct’ sentence and so on. By ‘correct’
we mean a sentence that follows the conventions of Standard English in its punctuation, spelling and grammar. The eventual advantage, from the student point of view, of being able to do this is that employers value anyone who can write grammatical sentences and convey information clearly and accurately. Think about it: if you receive a letter that includes a sentence such as *Student’s, insuring there property, a top priority for this coming year*, you might have doubts about the reliability of the firm. Your doubts would probably grow if the next sentence continued: *We offer a service, that is hard to beat and at a price, thats hard to beat for undergraduates*. If you can see that there are mistakes here, you have stood back from the sentences and read them critically and knowingly as a user of the language. You must try to develop a similar detached response to your own writing; repeatedly, and automatically, you should stand back just a little from your work and reflect on whether what you have said makes good sense. In order for any sentence to communicate effectively, it must follow some basic rules.

This is, however, only true of written sentences. Perhaps the most important thing to realise about using language is that speaking and writing are different activities with different conventions that we need to keep separate. In speech we rattle along, communicating in a highly effective but usually less precise and less formal manner than in writing. We make endless adjustments, often repeating ourselves and rephrasing what we have said, in order to make sure that the person listening understands us. Our body language and our facial expressions all aid this process. As most of us know from holidays abroad, it is even possible for two people who do not speak the same language to conduct a ‘conversation’. This is one of the advantages of spoken language, that it lends itself readily to situations and seems infinitely flexible. The same is true of written language, although on a lesser scale: we can use it creatively and informally, as, for example, in advertising or in email or in different forms of writing such as journals and diaries. In this book, however, as we have noted in the introduction, we are concerned with the formal aspects of writing: with the production of essays for academic and professional purposes. These are different kinds of activity from the informal ones or speech and need to be kept separate so as to avoid confusion.

In formal writing, every sentence has to be grammatically cohesive in order to be clear and comprehensible; it has to hang together as a unit. In this chapter we concentrate on the task of achieving this level of basic correctness (in Chapters 4 and 7 we return to the subject, looking at some of the other issues involved in composing an effective
sentence). Our main advice, as it will be throughout this book, is this: keep it simple and you will not go wrong. It is a far better idea to produce writing that is clear and correct than something that is ambitious but faulty. Your real target, however, is to produce work that is straightforward and methodical in structure yet complex in terms of the ideas expressed; if you can write correct sentences you will be able to achieve this goal.

‘Simple’ sentences
We want to start with simple sentences:

My grandfather likes football.

My sister has red hair.

I collect stamps.

A sentence is a grammatically complete unit, a group of words that makes sense. These are simple sentences, and the technical term for them is also simple sentences. They consist of a subject, a verb and an object. In the first example, My grandfather is the subject, likes is the verb, and football is the object. Usually the subject comes first in the sentence: it is what the sentence is about. Traditional grammars speak of the subject as the ‘doer of the action’, and this can be a useful way of remembering what a subject is. Then follows the verb, which ‘agrees’ with the subject, the two going together: we write He likes but I like. The verb must match the subject; we all recognise I likes as a deliberate breaking of this rule, perhaps acceptable in speech but never in formal writing. The object, if there is one in the sentence, usually follows the verb.

Every sentence needs at least a subject and a finite verb: for example, David coughed. ‘Finite’ means that the verb shows when something was done, that it has a tense. So, David coughs is the present tense; David coughed is the past tense. Most people would know that if we wrote David coughing that something was wrong with the sentence, that we would need to insert another verb part such as is or was before coughing. And most people would realise that we cannot write David to cough and make sense. For sentences to work, they have to have the appropriate verb form, and this is usually the present or the past tense, or a combination of words using additional verbs such as will, shall, could, is. The only exception is sentences such as Help!, where the subject and object are implicit. Help is really a condensation of something like ‘Please will you help me?’, but that might be a bit of a mouthful to shout if you were drowning.
Subject/verb/object

The commonest structure of simple sentences is subject/verb/object:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My grandfather</td>
<td>likes</td>
<td>football.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My sister</td>
<td>has</td>
<td>red hair.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>collect</td>
<td>stamps.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Can you see from these examples how straightforward the logic of a sentence is? You have a subject, and then you go on to offer a little more information about the subject through the verb and the rest of the sentence.

The subject names something; the verb is what the subject does or is. Whenever you write, you should be making a quick mental check that your sentences have a subject, a verb and, usually, an object. Making such a check should become instinctive, just as we instinctively check various things when driving. But even the most confident writers need to stop now and then and make a precise check of their sentences. Sometimes the subject, verb and object might take a moment to find. Look, for example, at this sentence:

On the 9th of September, the world changed forever when terrorists crashed planes into New York's Twin Towers.

There seem to be several subjects and verbs in this sentence. The same is going to appear to be the case in nearly all sentences that consist of more than a few words. The fact is, however, that most of the words in this sentence are merely supporting the main subject and verb: the world changed forever. The presence of the subject and verb is most easily revealed by asking which words could be omitted and the sentence still make sense: On the 9th of September is just a phrase telling us when something happened; when terrorists crashed planes has a subject (terrorists) and a verb (crashed) and an object (planes), but this is not what the sentence is about, its main topic. Of the three groups of words, only the world changed forever can stand on its own as a sentence.

The above discussion has taken us a long way towards getting hold of sentences. It is worth remembering, however, that underlying the whole business is the simple sentence of the kind we are taught in primary school. One of the first things we learn is how to write simple sentences: Janet likes John. Sometimes, however, we forget the vital things we learnt years ago or we undervalue them. They are useful because they reinforce the basics. A sentence starts with a capital letter
and finishes with a full stop or a question mark or, very rarely, an exclamation mark. It has a subject and a main verb. At primary school you might be expected to write something along the following lines:

My name is Charlotte. I am six. I collect stickers. I have two brothers. I am going to be an airline pilot.

It might seem like labouring the point, but try to see how there is a subject and verb, or subject/verb/object pattern in each of these sentences. Don’t be put off by the fact that in the last sentence the verb consists of more than one word – *am going to be*. Similarly, the subject in a sentence can be more than one word. If Charlotte had decided to complete her self-portrait with the comment that *Life sucks*, we would probably be surprised, but we might also note that she has constructed a perfectly sound subject (*Life*) and verb (*sucks*) sentence.

One issue we have ducked so far is what to do about sentences that do not have an object, as in *My name is Charlotte, I am six, I am going to be an airline pilot*, or:

My mum is a civil servant.

My dad plays in a band.

We should be able to see that *My mum* is the subject, and *is* the verb. What, though, of the other words in the sentence, *a civil servant*? What should we call them? They are clearly not the object: My mum does not do anything to a civil servant. The term linguists use for these other sentence elements is *complement*, whereas the words in the second example, *in a band*, are called an *adverbial*, but the important point to recognise is that they are not the object in the sentence. Sentences do not need an object, but they do need a subject and a finite verb.

Here we want to take stock and repeat the key points. There are a lot of terms used to describe and analyse the structure of sentences, but the only ones you really need to know are *subject*, *finite verb* and *object*. For all other practical purposes you can label everything else ‘other sentence elements’. We will, inevitably, be using other terms below, but you would be surprised just how many students suddenly find they can sort out their writing problems once they know these three basic terms and see how they underpin all sentences.

**Compound sentences**

Writing would, of course, be easy if it consisted exclusively of the generation and proliferation of simple sentences like those above. But it would also become boring and repetitive, and impose limits on what we could say, what ideas we could express (*My name is Hamlet. I live*
in Denmark. I want to be. I do not want to be.). Imagine a history essay constructed exclusively from simple sentences:

Adolf Hitler was born in 1889. He was born in Austria. He worked as a house-painter. He fought in the First World War. He became leader of the National Socialist Party. He became chancellor of Germany. The Second World War started in 1939. Hitler was Germany's leader. He was a dictator. He killed millions of Jews. He died in 1945. The war ended in 1945.

Somewhere along the way, between starting and leaving school, we acquire the ability (or should acquire the ability) to add variety and interest to such a simple sequence of sentences. We add more information, and probably ideas, to complement the basic facts, but our work will also start to sound more thoughtful as we develop and change the structure of the sentences. It is also the case that a sequence of simple sentences is difficult for the reader to follow since there seem to be no connections between the points. By the time of GCSE, however, the information above might appear as follows:

Adolf Hitler was born in Austria, in 1889. He worked as a house-painter and fought in the First World War, subsequently becoming leader of the National Socialist Party and chancellor of Germany. Hitler was then Germany's leader during the Second World War, which started in 1939; he was a dictator, and responsible for the death of millions of Jews. He died at the conclusion of the war, in 1945.

There is nothing essentially new or different about this account, as compared with the first version, but it has become more readable, as opposed to the previous listing of the facts. What has changed? In what ways have the sentences become more complicated in structure and, consequently, more weighty in tone?

The first complication consists simply of bringing two facts together in one sentence: the date of Hitler's birth is added as a phrase or element after the details of his place of birth. But the structure we want to focus on initially is the compound (or multiple) sentence: *He worked as a house-painter and fought in the First World War*. The connecting word in a compound sentence is likely to be either *and, but* or *or*. A compound sentence is as straightforward as this: it is two simple sentences joined by a connecting word. We should say that the result of joining the two sentences is a compound sentence, that is, a sentence with more than one clause. The term *clause* is just another way of describing the basic elements of subject, verb and object in a sentence. So, in a compound sentence such as the one above you get two main clauses: *He worked as a house-painter*, and then a second
clause *fought in the First World War*. Each of these has a subject (*He*) and each of them a finite verb (*worked; fought*). They are main clauses because each of them could stand on its own as a sentence and make sense. Compound sentences, then, are basically just simple sentences joined together by a conjunction. You can have more than two clauses, but the key thing to remember is the conjunction: *She worked as a sculptor and wrote novels and designed buildings and then became an MP*. This is somewhat heavy-handed and illustrates why we usually combine just two simple sentences at a time. It would be more stylish to write: *She worked as a sculptor, wrote novels, designed buildings and then became an MP*. Notice the *and* joining the last part of the sentence to the rest. Although the compound sentence is a straightforward structure, it can be used, as this last example shows, to produce a strong impact.

‘Complex’ sentences

We have, however, put together a more complicated sentence than this in the passage above:

> He worked as a house-painter and fought in the First World War, subsequently becoming leader of the National Socialist Party and chancellor of Germany.

Just as too many simple sentences become jerky and monotonous, it is almost equally monotonous to have too many main clauses that depend on a linking *and*. In this case, therefore, we have added a comma after *War* and then created a *subordinate* or *dependent clause*. As its name suggests, this is a clause that depends on the main clause and cannot stand on its own as a sentence: *subsequently becoming leader of the National Socialist Party and chancellor of Germany* is not a sentence. Most subordinate clauses are introduced by words such as *although, because, if, when, until, unless*. The purpose of subordinate clauses is to add something extra to the main statement contained in the main clause or clauses. *Complex sentences* are so called because their structure is more complex than that of simple sentences, not because they contain more complex ideas.

Nevertheless, because complex sentences display a more sophisticated sentence structure, they immediately add a feeling of maturity of expression to the sentence. This kind of use of a subordinate clause is the main complication to get hold of in sentence construction; if you can use subordinate clauses confidently, you can say anything. But if you can consciously vary the kind of sentences you write, changing perhaps from simple to compound to complex, or by deliberately using
a simple sentence structure for dramatic effect, then you will also show your reader that you are in control of your material and have thought about both its form and content.

We expand on subordinate clauses in the last section of this chapter, but before we proceed any further we want to make sure that you have thoroughly absorbed the basic rules. To recap: a sentence must have a subject and a finite verb. Sometimes the subject and verb will be supported by additional words and clauses, but at the heart of most sentences are the subject, a verb and an object. If you have a subject, a verb and an object, then the sentence can be assumed to be working properly as a sentence. All too often, however, as we consider in the next section, students make grammatical mistakes in putting sentences together.

How sentences go wrong

Most sentences that go wrong, go wrong in the same ways. They fail to comply with the rules about sentence structure. It is, of course, true that we can get in a tangle when we construct an elaborate sentence to make a complicated point, but this kind of snarled-up sentence is a far less common problem than sentences that fall apart because they fail to follow the elementary rules. There are two main mistakes that all writers of English make. They either produce would-be sentences that are not sentences but merely fragments; or they produce would-be sentences that are not sentences but two or more sentences run together: sometimes a comma is used to link the two sentences, and sometimes the two sentences are simply fused together. It is easy to make these mistakes, especially when drafting work, but it is also easy to correct them.

Sentence fragments

‘Sentence fragments’ stem from not recognising the difference between writing and speech, a point we have touched on before. We use ‘fragments’ over and over again when we are speaking. By fragments we mean incomplete sentences: they are fragments because they cannot stand alone and make grammatical sense even though they are presented as sentences, and even though we know what they mean. Look at these examples:

The behaviour of Members of Parliament has been widely criticised. Which isn’t surprising.

Facebook is indispensable. An easy way of keeping in touch.
Lottery winners have lots of money and very little to do all day. Unlike the majority of people.

In each case, the last few words in italics after the main sentence pretend to be a sentence but they are not. They are fragments: they lack a subject and they lack a finite verb. There are two ways of correcting the ‘fragment’ mistake. The additional phrase could either be absorbed into or added to the sentence that precedes it, or it could be rewritten as a complete and self-sufficient sentence. We could reconstruct the last example, therefore, either as:

Lottery winners have lots of money and very little to do all day, unlike the majority of people.

Or as:

Lottery winners, unlike the majority of people, have lots of money and very little to do all day.

Or as:

Lottery winners have lots of money and very little to do all day. This is quite unlike the majority of people.

In the first instance, a comma is substituted for the full stop. In the second instance, the fragment has been absorbed into the main frame of the sentence. In the third instance, the addition of a subject (This) and a verb (is) has turned the phrase into a main or independent clause so that it can stand on its own as a second sentence.

Fragments often appear in examination essays, particularly when the candidate is telling a story or describing a sequence of events or actions:

David Copperfield moved to London. Where he met Micawber.

Napoleon returned as the leader of the French. Until the Battle of Waterloo was over.

The chemical mixture gave off a pungent smell. While the colour remained the same.

There are different ways of correcting these; for example:

David Copperfield moved to London, where he met Micawber.

Napoleon returned as the leader of the French until the Battle of Waterloo was over.

The chemical mixture gave off a pungent smell, while the colour remained the same.

In each of these cases, the fragment at the end is, in fact, a subordinate
clause that cannot stand on its own. They are parts of sentences that amplify or modify the meaning of what has gone before, rather than complete sentences. They depend for their sense on the main sentence before them. You should try to avoid such fragments. Not only are they grammatically incorrect from a formal point of view, but they also make your work seem disjointed. They create the impression that you are thinking in little steps rather than seeing, and writing about, an issue as a whole. In that respect, they do not communicate your ideas effectively to your reader. In addition, they create a chatty tone that is inappropriate in the formal context of an essay.

**Comma splices and fused sentences**

People who litter their work with fragments are equally likely to resort to ‘run-together’ sentences. Look at this example:

> I went down the pub with my friends, when I got home I discovered I’d lost my wallet, along with all my credit cards, even though I wanted to go to bed, I had to start making phone calls to get my cards cancelled, however, they turned up later.

If this were speech, it would be perfectly acceptable, although hard to say without obvious pauses: it would be an everyday experience conveyed in everyday language. It is, however, totally unsatisfactory as a written account. It might make sense in this instance, but the structure is monotonous, and there would be problems if the writer wanted to convey an idea rather than just a sense of what happened next. What is wrong here is that a comma is being used repeatedly as the only device to keep the long sentence under control. The term for this is a **comma splice**, meaning that clauses are joined by a comma when they should be divided into sentences or joined by conjunctions or punctuated differently. A corrected version of this example might read as follows:

> I went down the pub with my friends. When I got home I discovered I’d lost my wallet, along with all my credit cards. Even though I wanted to go to bed, I had to start making phone calls to get my cards cancelled. However, they turned up later.

Sometimes sentences are run together without even the use of a comma. In these cases we can refer to the sentences as being **fused** – for example:

> I heard him sing it was awful.

Here we have three possible ways of putting things right:
I heard him sing; it was awful.
I heard him sing. It was awful.
I heard him sing, and it was awful.

All three ways separate the original fused sentence into its two clear parts.

Comma-splicing and fusing can take the form seen in the examples above, where we have exaggerated to make the point, but a far more common mistake in student essays is an occasional breach of the rules, where the writer forgets and combines two quite separate sentences. Consider this example:

Water is the most important compound on earth, it is found on the surface and in the atmosphere. It is also present in animals and plants.

The comma here is a comma splice. There are actually three main sentences:

Water is the most important compound on earth. It is found on the surface and in the atmosphere. It is also present in animals and plants.

These are three simple sentences using the same format. The writer tried in the first version to avoid this, but as a result ended up splicing two sentences together. A way round this might have been:

Water, the most important compound on earth, is found on the surface and in the atmosphere.

Here is a typical example of a fused sentence:

She did really well at school she came top of the class again this year.

The clue to the fusing is the repetition of the word *she*. Notice that to make sense of this sentence as it stands, we have to pause after *school*. There are, in fact, two sentences here:

She did really well at school. She came top of the class again this year.

Alternatively, we could use a subordinate clause structure:

She did really well at school, coming top of the class again this year.

It is, of course, quite possible that you might look at these last few examples and wonder whether any of this matters. You might feel that the ‘unconventional’ version is just as clear as the ‘conventional’ version of the sentence. And perhaps it is, in an isolated, simple sentence. Unless you maintain control over all the basic structures such as these, however, your written work is going to get in an awful tangle as you attempt to say more and to write at greater length. In
particular, you will find that you cannot handle the expression of a complex idea in your written work if the sentence collapses in the very process of trying to formulate the idea. More importantly, if you rely on fragments, comma-splicing and fused sentences, you will create an impression that you are a less than competent writer. By contrast, if you show that you are in charge of your writing and know the appropriate conventions, you will create a positive impression of someone with something to say that is worth reading.

**Constructing ‘complex’ sentences**

So far we have focused on constructing relatively simple sentences and avoiding the most common errors. As a student, however, you will want to progress far beyond this. You will want to ensure that you write in an effective and clear way, but also that you interest your readers and persuade them of the worth of your ideas. A useful resource for this is ‘complex sentences’. As we indicated above, this is a technical term, meaning sentences made up of one independent main clause and one or more dependent (that is, subordinate) clauses. Here is a complex sentence:

Even though it is an expensive place to live, London remains a great lure.

This, obviously, is a sentence about London. It begins with a subordinate clause: *Even though it is an expensive place to live*. There then follows the main clause: *London remains a great lure*. Notice that the main clause could stand on its own as a sentence, but the subordinate clause could not. We could, of course, turn the whole sentence round and begin with the main clause and then add on the subordinate clause: *London remains a great lure, even though it is an expensive place to live*.

As we noted earlier, the reason for incorporating subordinate clauses into your work is that they enable you to put together sentences that convey more information, more ideas, and more nuances of thought and expression. Consider this passage:

Although we know nothing for certain about the origin of the universe, we can surmise that it began with an explosion. The most recent evidence for this comes from the work of astronomers, though it has yet to be measured against other theories. While it may turn out to be just another theory, its importance could be that it leads eventually towards a new understanding of the earth’s position in the solar system and, if we are to believe the reports, a new grasp of the significance of sunspots.
As you can see, the structure of the sentences has to be fairly intricate to control and express the range of ideas. But it is a two-way street. The structure of the sentences has to be disciplined, conforming to the established grammatical rules for constructing a sentence, in order to impose control over ideas that, otherwise, might evade clear definition.

What we also have to recognise, of course, is that it is at this stage that many people start to have real problems with their written English. It is all very well writing down simple ideas in simple sentences, but in venturing further, things can start to fall apart. The transition, however, is worthwhile: if you can construct and control complex sentences, you will find you can manage any writing task you are set.

**Subordinate clauses**

We have encountered two main problems with the work of university students. First, as we have suggested above, there are students who produce work in which the sentences are almost invariably a little too simple, and this creates an overall impression of conceptual simplicity. The effect is of a string of points, as if the writer expects the reader to forge the connections between them. The second problem we regularly encounter, however, is just the opposite: students who, because they are trying to say complicated things, run into difficulty in framing sentences to express their thoughts. Where both groups of students go wrong is that they fail to see how the basic rules of constructing sentences, if followed with a degree of self-awareness, can enable more intricate ideas to be expressed in a controlled and confident way. The main thing that is involved here is being aware of the logic of how to position and introduce a subordinate clause. In order to illustrate this, we want to return to the information we used earlier about Hitler. At that stage we illustrated simple sentences and compound sentences, and began to touch on subordinate clauses. If we return to that material, we can produce another version of it:

Adolf Hitler, who was born in Austria in 1889, worked as a house-painter and fought in the First World War before becoming the leader of the Nationalist Socialist Party and, subsequently, the chancellor of Germany.

Through the use of two subordinate clauses (**who was born in Austria in 1889**; and **before becoming the leader of the Nationalist Socialist Party and, subsequently, the chancellor of Germany**), several sentences have been compressed into a single sentence, but it is still easy to follow as the sentence is disciplined and obeys grammatical rules. The main benefit for the student, however, is that the compression makes the sentence seem more considered and weighty than the same ideas...
expressed in a sequence of simple sentences. The reader can grasp and think about the related points but also see that the writer has thought about the best way to present the material.

One advantage, then, of the complex sentence is that it introduces this extra degree of polished construction into your work. This is not difficult to achieve. One important thing to remember is how to signal the beginning of the subordinate clause through the use of the comma, with another comma to signal the end of the clause. If the subordinate clause forms the end of the sentence, it will finish, of course, with a full stop. Where students sometimes go wrong is that they fail to read a sentence back to themselves to see whether the subordinate clauses have been subsumed into the sentence in an effective way. The trick is to think a little bit more about the overall shape (and sound) of a sentence. We will turn to the signals that help us introduce subordinate clauses in a minute, but for the moment consider the difference between the raw version of a scientific account here, and the version that is rewritten with a focus on moulding the sentences. This is the simple version:

The brain is an organ. It controls most of the body's activities. It is the only organ able to produce 'intelligent' action.

At one level, there is nothing wrong with this. It does, however, suffer from being a little stilted because the sentences all follow the same pattern. We rewrote it thus:

The brain, the organ that controls most of the body's activities, is the only organ able to produce ‘intelligent’ action.

Through subordinate clauses, the three simple sentences have been compressed into one, although only two words have actually been lost. It is clear that the second and third sentences in the first version are on the same theme as the first sentence, that they expand on it, and so it is fairly easy to see how the sentences can be put together naturally and form a more interesting statement.

**Subordinating conjunctions**

We are likely to be more aware of these procedures if we recognise some of the words that signal, or help us introduce, subordinate clauses. A subordinate clause often begins with a **subordinating conjunction**. Often these are clauses indicating time:

After looking for a while, my dad gave up the search.

When he was a young man, my dad was very fit.

Since coughing a lot last Christmas, my dad has stopped smoking.
The most common subordinating conjunctions are:

- after
- although
- as
- because
- if
- once
- since
- than
- that
- unless
- until
- when
- where
- whereas

You can, therefore, often be aware that you are setting up a subordinate clause when you use one of these signal words. We should point out that some of these words can also be used as prepositions (that is, small words such as in, on, by, to that show how two parts of a sentence or clause relate to each other, as in We ran into the house). Indeed, many words can perform several functions, which is why grammar can be so elusive. The trick is to remember the main structure rather than all the details: subordinate clauses are attached to main clauses and cannot stand on their own as sentences. It is worth adding that subordinate clauses, like main clauses, normally contain a subject and a main verb, as distinct from phrases, which do not.

There are other subordinating words for setting up subordinate clauses. These are words such as who that relate or link to someone or something said before. They are called relative pronouns – the obvious ones are that, who and which, but whoever is also included here. For example:

We went over to talk to the old man who was fishing.

The use of the subordinate clause introduced by who here enables us to avoid saying We went over to talk to the old man. He was fishing. It is a trivial difference in many ways, but it is on the basis of such minor remoulding of sentences that the most complicated things can be said.

The real test of whether you have grasped subordinate clauses is if you can recognise them. Here is a simple sentence: Miss Brooke was beautiful. Here is a complex sentence (the opening sentence of George Eliot’s novel Middlemarch):

Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress.

The logic of this is easy to work out. A sentence starts with a subject. The subject of this sentence is Miss Brooke. It then advances some information about the subject. The simple sentence merely points out that she was beautiful, whereas the complex sentence modifies the statement or adds additional ideas. As in this example, the sentence
must rely on subordinate clause signal words (in this case *which*) to expand the idea and include the extra information.

We do not want to set too many exercises in this book since our prime concern is to explain basic points in a clear fashion. You might, however, wish to try this one. Write down ten facts about your life in the form of ten single sentences. For example, sentences such as these:

I was born in 1977.

I was born in Harrow.

I went to school in Harrow.

Then see if you can compress them into fewer sentences but conveying all the same information:

I was born in 1977, in Harrow, where I also went to school.

As you can see from our example here, the moment you start doing this you construct not only compound sentences (*I was born and went to school in Harrow*) but also complex sentences, involving subordinate clauses. Our feeling is that if you can spot the use of subordinate clauses in texts that you are reading, and spot the use of them in your own work – even though you might not know all the technical terms, or know precisely where the subordinate clauses start and stop – you will be that much more confident about writing complex sentences. The use of subordinate clauses in your sentences will lead towards better writing and, we hope, better marks. At the same time, using subordinate clauses or writing compound sentences will cure the bad habits of using comma splices and sentence fragments.

**Summary**

If you have read this chapter with an eye on how to improve your writing, you should have acquired a reasonable understanding of the following:

1. The structure of a simple sentence (subject/verb/object): *The dog bit the man.*
2. The structure of a compound sentence (two main clauses joined by ‘and’): *The dog bit the man and then ran off.*
3. The principle of how to employ subordinate constructions in order to make complex sentences (main clause plus subordinate clause): *The dog, which had never been known to be vicious, bit the man.*
4 How to avoid fragments, comma splices and fused sentences – use conjunctions, absorb the material into the sentence, or begin a new sentence.

These are the basics of writing well; the only other principles are punctuation – in order to signal to the reader how to read your sentences – and the use of the appropriate words, which includes words that are spelt correctly. It is punctuation and spelling that we go on to discuss in Chapters 2 and 3.
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