

Sentence Types



Sentences are one of the most basic units of writing. There are different kinds of sentences that are made up of combinations between clauses and phrases. Understanding how to navigate and connect these different kinds of sentences is essential to maintaining coherence and clarity in writing. This handout goes over the definitions of the four sentence types and how to identify them.

Independent vs. Dependent clauses

To understand sentences, we must first understand clauses. An independent clause has at least one subject and one verb, and can stand on its own. A dependent clause cannot stand on its own and must therefore be connected to an independent clause.

Example

- Turning the key. (dependent clause)
- Pandora opened the box. (independent clause)

Simple Sentences

A simple sentence is made up of one independent clause. A simple sentence has no dependent clause.

Example

- Pandora opened the box.

Compound Sentences

A compound sentence is made up of at least two independent clauses. There are four ways to join these independent clauses: coordinating conjunction (and, but, etc.), semicolon, semicolon + conjunctive adverb + comma, or a dash.

Example

- Pandora opened the box and chaos was released. (coordinating conjunction)
- Pandora opened the box; chaos was released. (semicolon)
- Pandora opened the box; thus, chaos was released. (semicolon + conjunctive adverb + comma)
- Pandora opened the box—chaos was released. (dash)

Complex Sentences

A complex sentence is made up of one independent clause and at least one dependent clause, often connected with a comma. (For more information on commas, see our other handout titled “Commas”.)

Example

- Turning the key, Pandora opened the box.

Compound-Complex Sentences

A compound-complex sentence is made up of two or more independent clauses and one or more dependent clauses.

Example

- Turning the key, Pandora opened the box and chaos was released.

Conclusion

The ability to identify sentence types is a building block for other writing skills. It can help you avoid using a particular type of sentence too frequently and help you select the appropriate sentence type for your purpose.