With rare exceptions, college students are expected to use grammatically complete sentences. Native speakers intuitively recognize complete sentences, versus fragments or run-on sentences. (A run-on sentence is two sentences forced into one without joining words or punctuation. A fragment is an incomplete sentence, and may lack a subject or verb, or be a subordinate clause.) When intuition doesn’t provide an answer, grammatical requirements need to be checked.

**Subject-predicate**

A complete sentence requires a subject and a predicate. The predicate must include at least a verb that is linked to the subject. Therefore, the shortest possible complete sentence would be two words, such as “I am.” Usually, however, a sentence will be much more elaborate, with objects of verbs, adjectives, adverbials (such as prepositional phrases), and compounding.

Recognizing a complete sentence requires the ability to recognize the subject and the main verb, and to distinguish them from other noun phrases or subordinate verbs. Often the subject is the first noun that appears in the sentence, and the main verb is the first verb. But there are many, many exceptions to this. Put as simply as possible, the subject is the “thing” that the sentence is about; the main verb is what that thing does – unless the verb is a linking verb like “is,” in which case the verb simply links the “thing” to more information about it.

**Sample 1:** The ornery cat gave me a withering look, before it dashed away into the night.

In this example, “The ornery cat” is the subject. (“Cat” is the simple subject, without any modifiers.) “Gave” is the verb, “me” is the indirect object, and “look” is the direct object. “The ornery cat gave me a withering look,” could stand on its own as a complete sentence, so it is an independent clause. There is another clause in the sentence, which could cause confusion. (A clause has a subject and verb but might not be a complete sentence.) The clause, “before it dashed away into the night,” is not an independent clause, however, because it’s introduced by the
subordinating conjunction “before.” That makes it a subordinate clause, a component of a sentence, but not a complete sentence.

Sample 2: The person who delivered the pizza must have gone to the wrong address.

Here, the simple subject is “person,” but the complete subject is much longer. The clause, “who delivered the pizza,” is a relative clause, which tells us which person in particular the sentence is about; it “relates” back to the word “person” (thus the term “relative”). So the complete subject is, “The person who delivered the pizza.”

The main verb is what the subject did: he went somewhere. But the verb is not a simple verb here; it’s a verb phrase, “must have gone.” A modal auxiliary (“must”) is combined with the present perfect formation (“have gone”). The prepositional phrase, “to the wrong address,” introduced by the preposition “to,” acts as an adverb, telling us where the person went.

Sample 3: In case you’re interested, there’s pumpkin pie in the staff fridge.

In this sentence, the subordinate clause occurs first, so we know the main subject won’t be found there. “In case” isn’t a one-word subordinating conjunction, but it serves that role here (like the word “if”), so the clause, “In case you’re interested,” is subordinate.

Finding the subject in the second clause might be tricky, though. It’s tempting to say it is “there,” because “there” occurs right before the linking verb “is.” In this expletive construction, however, the subject comes after the verb. The complete subject is “pumpkin pie.” Imagine the clause rewritten as, “Pumpkin pie is in the staff fridge.” Then it’s much easier to see the subject, the linking verb “is,” and the prepositional phrase “in the staff fridge,” which provides more information about the subject.

Common Errors

A complete sentence must have both subject and verb, but, as seen in some examples above, having a subject and verb isn’t always sufficient.Clauses have a subject and verb, but other factors might prevent them from being independent clauses, or complete sentences. As well, verbs sometimes take on other roles, making it appear there is a verb when in fact there isn’t.
Sample 1: Since I got out of school, whenever I meet someone who used to be a classmate, as soon as I get the chance to have coffee with them because I miss them.

There are four clauses in this example: “I” is the subject of each one, and the verbs are “got,” “meet,” “get,” and “miss.” Yet this statement is not a complete sentence, because there is no main clause; every one of the clauses is subordinate. “Since,” “whenever,” and “because” are all subordinating conjunctions, and “as soon as” also fills that role.

This sentence could be repaired by adding a main clause, or transforming one of the subordinate clauses into a main clause, in this case, “I have coffee with them as soon as I get a chance.”

Sample 2: The truth being that we can’t just start writing without thinking first.

This is called an absolute phrase. What misleads the author is the apparent verb, “being.” “Be” is a verb. “Being,” the present participle, can be part of a verb phrase, such as in the present progressive, “I am being as calm as possible.” But when it stands by itself, “being” may be a gerund (a noun formed from a verb), the start of a participial phrase, which can act as a noun, adjective, adverb or even a preposition, or, in this case, an absolute phrase that modifies another sentence entirely. (Note that the phrase contains a noun clause, “that we can’t just start writing without thinking first.”)

The simplest way to fix the fragment is to turn “being” into a proper verb, in this case, “is”: “The truth is that we can’t just start writing without thinking first.”

Sample 3: Which is why we decided to study right through the night.

This mistake happens often because the author feels a sentence is getting too long and wants to break it up somewhere. Unfortunately, this leftover from a previous sentence cannot stand on its own. The subject in this example is the relative pronoun, “which.” The relative pronoun indicates that this is a relative clause, and not an independent clause. It is giving us information that relates to something previous in the sentence – except that there is nothing previous in the sentence!

The best way to repair the damage is to rejoin the relative clause to the (hopefully) independent clause that precedes it. Replacing the relative pronoun with a demonstrative pronoun (“this” or “that”) would make the
sentence grammatically complete, but would likely leave the dissatisfying result of a vague referent: it wouldn’t be clear what “that” refers to.

Sample 4: The vet handed us a huge bill, the cat had been sicker than we thought.

Finding a complete sentence is much easier here, because there are in fact two of them. The two subjects are “the vet” and “the cat”; the verbs are “handed” and “had been.” (While “than we thought” is also a clause, it is a dependent clause because it is an adverb clause modifying “sicker.”) Because there are two complete sentences joined by a comma without any other form of conjunction, this is the error known as a comma splice.

There are several ways to repair a comma splice.

1) Usually the best solution is to replace the comma with a semi-colon (;). Joining two independent clauses is the semi-colon’s reason for being. If the author kept the two independent clauses in one sentence, then they are probably related closely enough to justify using a semi-colon. If the second clause explains or expands upon the first (as in this example), then a colon might be better.

2) Alternatively, one could add a coordinating or subordinating conjunction after the comma. Often a simple “and” or “but” will suffice. In this example, a subordinating conjunction showing causality could be appropriate: “because,” or “since.”

3) Finally, the comma could be replaced with a period, making two sentences. This method would render two grammatically correct sentences, although it might lose the sense of connection the author was intending.

Exceptions

While there is no appropriate use of a run-on sentence and only infrequent uses for a comma splice, there are occasions when a sentence fragment can be used. Generally, the fragment should be avoided, but it can be used to create impact. Its most frequent use is probably as a rhetorical device, in answering one’s own question.

Examples:

“Why should we care about the plight of Africans? Because we are humans.”

“When will we surrender? When we die!”
Fragments can also effectively create a mood, as a poetic device.

**Example:** Cracked, broken, scattered among the ashes. The few recognizable personal items testified to the shattered lives of the families after the fire.

In dialogue, fragments occur frequently.

**Example:** “Where did you get your degree, doctor?”
“In Guatemala.”