

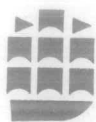


EVERYDAY ENGLISH

John Rook

John Rook

Everyday English



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Contents

	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	v
1	Writing in sentences The essentials of a sentence; Combining sentences by means of conjunctions; Building more complicated sentences; Conclusion; Exercises in synthesis (combining sentences); Fused and non-sentences; Parts of speech; Definitions	1
2	Sentence improvement	20
3	Reported speech Inclusion of "that" after the leading verb; Conversational abbreviations; Other colloquialisms; Using adverbs to convey a speaker's mood or manner; Ambiguity of pronouns; Minute-taking; Exercises	28
4	Punctuation The use of the full stop; The use of commas; Capital letters; Apostrophes; Semi-colons; The dash; Colons; Hyphens; Brackets; Question marks; Exclamation marks; Quotation marks; Italics; Paragraphing; Exercises in punctuation	40
5	Correctness Exercises	68
6	Plain language Exercises	79

7	Essay-writing	84
	The approach to essay-writing; Reading and understanding essay questions; Possibilities of essay topics; Treatment; Choosing the essay topic; Types of essay; Planning the essay; The plan on paper; Language and style; Two unsatisfactory essays; Essay questions from examinations	
8	Short compositions	122
	Exercises	
9	Precis and summary	131
	The precis question; Some general comments; Concluding advice; A worked example; Exercises	
10	Business letters	172
	Completeness; Conciseness; Planning; Tone; Language; Presentation; Some points to note; Expressions useful in business correspondence; Some typical openings; Two versions of a business letter; Exercises; Letters of application for jobs; Exercises; A telegraphic interlude; "Make-up letters"; Exercises	
11	Report-writing	226
	A useful and frequently-used plan for a special report; Example; Notes and comments on the foregoing report; Other types of plan for reports; Another example of a report; Report-making summarized; Exercises; Memoranda; Exercises	
12	Comprehension exercises	249
	How to answer comprehension questions in examinations; Types of question; Questions asking for the meaning of words and phrases; Other types of question; Ambiguity of questions; Some advice to remember; Comprehension practice; Exercises in comprehension	
13	Metaphors and similes	313
	Metaphors; Similes; Questions on metaphors and similes; Exercises	
14	Vocabulary exercises	320

Chapter 1

Writing in sentences

Written composition is a matter of deciding what you want to say and on the order in which you wish to say it, and then saying it — in well-planned sentences. (2/12)

Unfortunately, many people appear not to know what a sentence is. They write in fragments of sentences or in sentences which run into each other. This often makes it difficult for them to express what they want to say and throws an unfair burden on anyone who wants to, or has to, read what they have written. (2/12)

Accordingly, the main purposes of this opening chapter are: to try to give some indication of what a sentence is, to provide examples of groups of words which are not sentences, and to suggest ways in which short sentences can be expanded or combined with other sentences. We will not try to define a sentence (to say what a sentence is) since all adequate definitions of sentences are so academic that they can usually be understood only by those people who already know what a sentence is! (2/12)

Those who know what a sentence is know it because they do a lot of reading. Such people may decide that our account of how sentences can be expanded and combined is somewhat unrealistic; and they will probably be familiar with a wide variety of sentence patterns not dealt with in this section. They should find the sentence-construction exercises at the end of this chapter very easy. Nevertheless, they may find parts of this chapter useful.

First, we will consider — rather briefly — nouns and verbs.

NOUNS are the names of things (objects, substances, feelings, ideas, arts, sciences, living creatures, places) or the names of people. Here are some examples:

table, banana, beauty, air, postman, newspaper, laughter, book, hatred, fire, beginning, end, architect, Parliament, Germany, honesty, physics, Christianity, Frank Sinatra, existence, Napoleon, Henry VIII, polygon, spider, stupidity, fox.

There are forty-eight nouns in the following twenty sentences.

1. The cat sat on the mat.
2. William likes romantic films.
3. My brother eats like a horse.
4. My father sleeps in a tent.
5. Sociology is the study of society.
6. My friend is not going to France for his holidays this year.
7. That boxer is the champion of the world.
8. A pantechinon is a very large lorry.
9. Television is sometimes a great time-waster.
10. Marx was one of the first advocates of Communism.
11. Diamonds are a girl's best friend.
12. His house consists of three rooms.
13. Her beauty did not astonish him.
14. America was discovered by Columbus but was named after Amerigo Vespucci.
15. John is writing a letter.
16. The train will be arriving in two hours' time.
17. Imagine my horror when I heard the news!
18. The first artificial satellite was launched by the Russians.
19. Miss Jones is making the report.
20. The letter is being dictated to the Principal's secretary.

The underlined words in the above sentences are VERBS. Verbs may consist of a single word or of groups of words, e.g. *was bitten, will have been doing*. Usually, verbs express actions (e.g. *hits, chewed, was running, will have left, would have been eating*) but note that many verbs do not express actions — not physical actions, at any rate, e.g. *is, are, am, were, have, exist, possess, sleep, lie* (i.e. on the rug), *hear, see, taste, smell, feel, think, understand, love, hate, appreciate, consist, comprise, believe, consider*. It will be noticed that some words can be used

as nouns or verbs, according to the job those words are doing in a sentence, e.g. *sleep, smell, taste, love*.

There are ten verbs and seventeen nouns in the following sentences:

1. My friend loves ice-cream.
2. Rome is in Italy.
3. She will be arriving soon.
4. I would have liked to come.
5. The little town lies at the foot of the mountain.
6. The dog was bitten by the man.
7. We never listen to classical music.
8. Darwin propounded the theory of evolution.
9. The noise at the discotheque almost deafened me.
10. Man is still trying to eradicate disease.

The essentials of a sentence

A sentence must always have a *subject* and a *verb*.

The subject is the thing or person that does the action described by the verb or has it done to it or him (as in sentence 6 above).

Subjects are always nouns or groups of words that represent nouns (e.g. *What we want* is more money), or PRONOUNS (*I, you, he, she, it, we, they, one, this, that, these, those, yours, ours, theirs, mine*).

The following are examples of complete sentences, complete because they all have subjects and verbs.

1. London is the capital of the United Kingdom. (Contains two proper nouns.)
2. John loves Mary.
3. Mary was once loved by Peter.
4. She swims well.
5. Malcolm sneezed.
6. Those are mine.
7. The dog chased the cat.
8. I was not eating my lunch.
9. The Anti-Combination Acts were passed in 1799.
10. That is clear.
11. I like milk.
12. It does me good.
13. Russia was attacked by Germany in 1941.
14. Yours is smaller than ours.

15. One should practise caution. (Contains an abstract noun.)
16. Before the days of limited liability people were often not willing to invest their money.
17. That he will come is certain.
18. What I want to say to you can wait.
19. Whether he will arrive is not certain.
20. Why she wants to take the examination is not clear.

In the last four sentences the subjects, groups of words which we call noun clauses, have been underlined.

Note that a present participle (e.g. *eating*, on its own) or a past participle (e.g. *having eaten*, or *eaten*, on its own) cannot do the job of a verb. Nor can an *infinitive* (e.g. *to be*, *to go*, *to exist*, etc.).

If there is no complete verb there cannot be a sentence, even though there may appear to be a subject. The following groups of words are not sentences:

- With reference to your letter of March 6th. (No verb and no subject.)
- With reference to your letter of April 17th concerning a proposed visit of a group of your students to the Victoria and Albert Museum. (No verb and no subject.)
- Sausages frying in the pan. (No verb.)
- The Government resigning today. (No verb.)
- In answer to your enquiry. (No verb and no subject.)
- Blue-grey storm clouds scudding across the sky. Trees bending before the wind. People hurrying home. (No verbs.)
- Thanking you in anticipation. (No verb and no subject.)
- Having eaten my breakfast. (No verb and no subject.)
- Sipping cocktails by moonlight. (No verb and no subject.)
- Keeps my dentures sparkling clean! (No subject.)
- Makes you feel young again! (No subject.)

Combining sentences by means of conjunctions

Sentences, each of course containing a subject and a verb, cannot be hooked together with commas. This sort of thing is wrong:

- I was so tired, I fell asleep.
- I like milk, it does me good.

- Britain is in the Common Market, people argue about this, they will still be arguing in ten years' time.
- The most important cause of the increase in the size of England's population in the second half of the eighteenth century was not the rise in the birth-rate, it was the fall in the death-rate, this was largely due to a rise in living standards.

Such sentences can be joined only by CONJUNCTIONS — joining words. Some of the commonest conjunctions are: and, but, so, although, since, because, as, before, after, if, unless, when, for (when it introduces a reason for believing something already said) and that (when it introduces a result or something said, seen, or felt). For example:

- I was so tired that I feel asleep. (When the *that* is missed out from "result" sentences it is often a sign that the writer is writing down speech, because, through lack of reading, he has insufficient experience of written words.)
- I like milk because it does me good.
- Britain is in the Common Market and people argue about this and they will still be arguing in ten years' time. [What a poor style!]
- The most important cause of the increase in the size of England's population in the second half of the eighteenth century was not the rise in the birth-rate but the fall in the death-rate, and this was largely due to a rise in living standards.
- We played tennis although it was raining.
- The train was late so I was furious.
- I watched television after I had eaten my tea.
- You ought to be grateful to her for she has saved you a lot of trouble.
- John liked Jean because she looked beautiful.
- It rained so heavily that the streets were flooded.
- He said that she was happy.

It should be noted that *therefore*, *however*, and *then* should not be used as conjunctions, for they are not joining words. The following sentences are incorrectly joined:

- It was raining therefore we couldn't play tennis.
- Later it stopped however the courts were too wet.
- I watched television for a while, then I went to bed, however I couldn't get to sleep.

Many people seem extremely unwilling to use *but* when they

write, perhaps because they think that in writing one should never use the obvious word! People's fondness for *therefore* instead of *so* may perhaps be the result of their having been told at school not to overdo the use of *so*.

Try joining up the sentences in each of the following groups:

1. I like ice-cream. It is fattening.
2. The English team won. They were two men short. Circumstances did not favour them.
3. It is obvious that it is raining. That man is using his umbrella.
4. He met her on Thursday. They were married on Friday.
5. Pamela is an excellent typist. She works very hard.
6. You should clean your teeth. You go to bed.
7. New York is not the capital of the United States. Washington is. It is much smaller than New York.
8. All elephants are animals. The converse is not true.
9. Oscar Wilde referred to two nations separated by the same language. He was alluding to England and America. (Try *starting* your sentence with a conjunction.)
10. Jean is a fast accurate typist. She is good at spelling. She does not have to spend time desperately searching through the dictionary.

Now that you have connected the simple sentences in each group, each group is a longer sentence, but it could not be linked with another sentence by means of a comma. Either another conjunction would have to be used, or the whole thing would have to be replanned so as to incorporate the new material.

Building more complicated sentences

Simple sentences can, as we have noted, be attached by conjunctions to other simple sentences to make longer sentences, but this is of course not the only way of making longer sentences. Another way is to add single words or groups of words to a simple sentence.

Without being put off by the rather childish topic, consider the following sentence:

- The dog chased the cat.

By adding ADJECTIVES (describing words), we could say:

- The big brown dog chased the lazy black cat.

↓
15.24

By adding ADVERBS (which usually tell us how, how much, or how often), we might produce this sentence:

- The big brown dog angrily chased the disgracefully lazy black cat.

We could expand this sentence further by adding *clauses*, groups of words which contain complete verbs (or *finite verbs*, to use the correct grammatical term) but which cannot be treated as complete sentences.

By adding describing clauses (*adjectival clauses*), we might say:

↑ The big brown dog that lived in the house next to mine angrily chased the disgracefully lazy black cat, who was notorious for her dishonesty.

This sentence might be expanded still further by adding *adverbial clauses*. Adverbial clauses may tell us how, why, when and where an action takes place or under what disadvantages it takes place (although) or under what conditions it might take place (if). For example:

Although he had just had a heavy lunch at the residence of a hospitable friend and was feeling in consequence rather sleepy, the big brown dog that lived in the house next to mine angrily chased the disgracefully lazy black cat, who was notorious for her dishonesty, because the cat had stolen his bone.

This last sentence is still basically the five-word sentence we started with. It could rather clumsily be extended still further by means of a conjunction, e.g. "and he caught her" or "but, weighed down with carbohydrates, he was unable to overhaul her".

A fairly complicated sentence of this sort could be thought of as a number of short statements, one of them forming the basic sentence, the remainder turned into subordinate (supporting) clauses.

Another way of combining sentences or, to put it differently, of reducing the number of sentences one has to use to express one's meaning is to make phrases (very short groups of words) or single words do the job of whole sentences. For example:

- The book had a green cover. John wanted to buy it.

This can become:

- John wanted to buy the book with the green cover.
- Muhammad Ali has won many fights. He used to be known as Cassius Clay. He has won his fights easily.

This can become:

- Muhammad Ali, formerly known as Cassius Clay, has won many fights easily.
- Britain in the twentieth century has many economic problems. These problems are very serious. They are difficult to solve.

This can be synthesized as follows:

- Twentieth-century Britain has many very serious economic problems which are difficult to solve.

Consider the following five sentences:

- My friend is called John.
- I shall see him tonight.
- I shall see him at his house.
- I shall see him at eight o'clock.
- He wants to discuss next year's holiday.

By avoiding repetition and using an adverbial clause of reason (a clause which explains *why*), we may express the information contained in the five sentences in one sentence:

At eight o'clock tonight I shall see my friend John at his house because he wants to discuss next year's holiday.

Very useful for reducing the number of sentences one has to use are present participles (*laughing, running, arriving, etc.*) and past participles (*disgusted, beaten, having said, etc.*) and infinitives (*to see, to inspect, to be able, etc.*). Infinitives may often be used to express purpose. For example:

- I have to catch a train. It leaves at six o'clock.
- I have to catch a train leaving at six o'clock.
- I was disgusted by the poorness of the meal. I refused to pay the bill.
- Disgusted by the poorness of the meal, I refused to pay the bill.
- I had tea. Then I watched television.
- Having had tea, I watched television.
(Or, After I had had tea, . . . or, After tea, . . .)
- I wrote to the company. I wanted to ask them if they had any vacancies.
- I wrote to the company to ask them if they had any vacancies.
- I was leaving the cinema. Then I saw my friend.
- On leaving the cinema, I saw my friend.

When one uses participles, care should be taken to ensure that what is written makes sense. The action described by the

participle should be that performed by the subject of the sentence. The use of unrelated or misrelated participles sometimes has unfortunate results. For example:

- Coming out of the cinema, a taxi drew up.
- Being a wet day, I took my umbrella.
- Passing the workhouse, his eyes encountered the bill on the gate. (Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*.)
- If selected for an audition, we should defray your expenses. (Letter from the BBC.)
- Shopping in the town centre, a dog bit me on the ankle.
- Having inspected our records, you owe us £5.
- Having bought this magazine, I hope you will enjoy it. (Remark by the Editor of *Nottingham University Rag Magazine*.)
- Rounding the bend at 35 m.p.h., the "Red Lion" came into view.
- Walking up the street, the house numbers went from 2 to 60.
- Cautiously opening the cupboard door, a skeleton toppled out.
- Having refunded the £10 m. to the trade unions, their answer could hardly be unequivocal. (*Daily Telegraph*.)

It should in fairness be said that the intended meaning of most of these sentences is clear enough and that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries very great authors occasionally used participles in this rather casual way.

Conclusion

Much of what has been said so far will seem obvious to many of the people who read this book. Moreover, as suggested earlier, the account of how sentences may be formed and combined may seem to them unrealistic, and it will certainly seem incomplete.

The fact is that most people who do a good deal of reading usually have no difficulty in writing in sentences, since they are used to *seeing* sentences; and they are probably familiar with a wide variety of sentence-patterns — those with multiple subjects, for example. The exercises which start on page 10 will probably be child's play to them.

There are many other benefits to be got from reading: a

knowledge of the main grammatical rules, improved spelling, an understanding of the function of punctuation, an ever-widening vocabulary (i.e. the words that one knows exactly how to use) including many quite common words which are nevertheless not used very often in speech, a knowledge of what sorts of expression are acceptable in the written language; the realization that when we write we should say exactly what we mean and not be content with a vague approximation; and an appreciation of tone and style.

Now certainly there are people who do a large amount of reading but who, for one reason or another, never develop the ability to express themselves well in writing. It cannot be said that if one reads well one will certainly write well. What, however, is certain is that those who never read or who read very little or whose reading is restricted to those publications which are written in short sentences and simple words will never derive any of the benefits mentioned above. This is because their experience of language is mainly experience of conversation.

When we talk we usually talk in short sentences, fragments of sentences, interrupted sentences and sentences which start by following one pattern and finish in another; we use too few words or too many; and because we can rely on our listeners' knowledge of the situation in which the conversation is taking place and can communicate by gestures and facial expressions and tone of voice we often say things which if written down would seem utter nonsense. We often have to have several "goes" at expressing our meaning because we have little time to prepare what we want to say.

Clearly, this is no kind of practice for written composition, for clear communication in writing. Even those who are most adept at expressing their meaning clearly and vigorously in speech will never acquire any proficiency in written composition unless they read widely, attentively and often.

Exercises in synthesis (combining sentences)

The following should perhaps be regarded not as exercises but as tests, tests of skill in sentence construction — skill acquired by reading and developed by practice in writing. As exercises, i.e. as ways of improving written composition, their value is limited.

1. Rewrite the following passage in not more than three sentences, without using “and” or “but” or “so”.

Iceland is an island. It is volcanic. It lies in the North Atlantic Ocean. The area of Iceland is 40,000 square miles. The population is 200,000. Iceland was uninhabited before the 9th century. Then settlers came from Norway. Norway claimed authority there. For some centuries it was governed by Denmark. In 1944 Iceland became an independent republic. The main industry is fishing.

2. In each of the following combine the groups of short sentences into one good sentence. Do not use “and”, “but”, “so”, “then”, “therefore”. You may change the order of the sentences, but do not change the meaning.

- (a) I reached the river. It is near a little town. I was very frightened. I nearly trod on a snake. It was very large. It was crawling across the road. It had evidently been injured.
- (b) Harry was deserted by his family. One brother did not desert him. He badly needed help. He did not despair.

3. Show your skill at sentence structure by combining the following, in the most suitable way:

The herring is a genus of fish. It is allied to the sprat. It is found near the land. This is in the North Atlantic area. It is not found in the Mediterranean. There are about sixty species. Most are available as food. The common herring is found in schools. These swim near the surface. They move constantly. They go from place to place. They are following their food. There is a result. Herring fishery is uncertain. A good fishing area may be suddenly deserted. There may seem to be no reason for this. The herring feeds on minute creatures. It filters them out of the water. It does this by gill-rakers. These are at the side of the throat. They act like a kind of sieve. The baleen of the whale acts in the same way.

(Royal Society of Arts, English Language II, 1963.)

4. Reduce the following passage to eight or fewer sentences:

The streamer-tail is the most beautiful bird in Jamaica. Some people say it is the most beautiful bird in the world.