

## Subject/Verb Pairs & Punctuation

Subject-and-verb pairs are the essential skeletons on which we build sentences. Every sentence must have at least one pair, and most have more. Recognizing subject-verb pairs in your writing can help you avoid several serious sentence errors and express yourself more clearly and effectively:

- Avoid sentence fragments
- Avoid run-on sentences
- Know where to place commas and semicolons
- Avoid boring or choppy writing

A word group with a subject-verb pair is a *clause*. The subject and verb have to match and make sense together. This means the complete verb has to include any helpers or auxiliary verbs that help it make sense in that sentence, for example *may, might, can, will, have, has, had, is, are, am, been...*

Sentence	Subject-verb pair...	...The rest of the sentence
<i>We <u>may be</u> late.</i>	<i>we-may be</i>	<i>late</i>
<i>We <u>ll meet</u> you at the theater.</i>	<i>we-will meet</i>	<i>you at the theater</i>
<i>He <u>hasn't made</u> plans yet.</i>	<i>he-has made (omit not)</i>	<i>plans yet</i>
<i>He is studying engineering.</i>	<i>he-is studying</i>	<i>engineering</i>

A sentence can express a single complete thought with a single subject-verb pair:

*Children are naturally curious.*

It can also express a single complete thought with compound subjects (subject-subject-verb), compound verbs (subject-verb-verb) or compound subjects and verbs (subject-subject-verb-verb):

*Puppies and kittens are naturally curious.*

*Children explore their environments and test their limits.*

*Children and their caregivers can enjoy play time and learn new things together.*

Clauses like these that express complete thoughts are *independent* (they are independent enough to stand on their own). You may choose to join complete thoughts. You may use either a *comma-FANBOYS* or a *semicolon*:

*Puppies and kittens are naturally curious, so you must watch them closely.*

*Children explore their environments and test their limits; learning comes naturally to them.*

Other subject-verb pairs create clauses that are *dependent* (they must lean on an independent thought and cannot stand on their own). The following clauses have subject-verb pairs but nevertheless are not complete thoughts:

*Since puppies and kittens are naturally curious*

*When children explore their environments*

*Because children and their caregivers enjoy play time together*

Quite a few words like *since*, *when*, and *because* make a thought incomplete even if it has a subject-verb pair. Others include *if*, *though*, *although*, *even though*, *while*, and *which*. If you have a clause that starts with one of these words, you must complete the idea by connecting it to an independent clause.

### Punctuation for complete thoughts

The subject-verb pairs in your writing are important clues for how to punctuate, too. Here are some punctuation rules based just on the idea of subject-verbs pairs described so far:

- A *period* may follow a single complete thought, but it may *not* follow an incomplete thought.
- A *semicolon* may join two complete thoughts but it may *not* join incomplete thoughts.
- A *comma-and* (or any *comma-FANBOYS*) may join two complete thoughts.
- You may *not* join two complete thoughts with a *comma*.
- You *don't* need a *comma* with a compound subject or a compound verb (unless there are three or more—in other words, a list).

### Punctuation for joining incomplete with complete thoughts

You may combine incomplete with complete thoughts. In that case, you separate the incomplete from the complete. This is an important *comma* rule:

*Since puppies and kittens are naturally curious, you must watch them closely.*

*When children explore their environments, they learn in a natural way.*

*Because children and caregivers enjoy play time together, it becomes a bonding experience.*

(However, if you reverse the order of these clauses to start with the complete thought, you do *not* use the comma between them: *Children learn in a natural way when they explore their environments.*)

### Sentence variety

One way to make writing “flow” is to use a variety of sentence lengths and connect some (not all) of your complete thoughts. You can also create clauses starting with words like *since*, *when*, *because*, *if* (and others) and then combine them with complete thoughts. The punctuation rules apply no matter how you mix them up:

Simple sentence: one complete thought, one subject-verb pair	<i><u>Children love to explore.</u></i>
Simple sentence: one complete thought, one subject-verb pair (compound verb)	<i><u>Children will touch and taste everything.</u></i>
Compound sentence: two complete thoughts, two separate subject-verb pairs	<i><u>Children love to explore; they are never bored.</u></i> <i><u>Children love to explore, so they are never bored.</u></i>
Complex sentence: one complete and one incomplete thought, two separate subject-verb pairs	<i><u>Because they love to explore, children are never bored.</u></i> <i><u>Children are never bored because they love to explore.</u></i>
Compound-complex sentence: two complete and one incomplete thought, three separate subject-verb pairs.	<i><u>Children are never bored because they love to explore; they will touch and taste everything.</u></i>

Remember that sentence variety means using both long and short sentences. Short sentences can make a big impact when they are surrounded by longer, more complex sentences.

*Contributed by Rosemary McKeever*



This Yuba College Writing & Language Development Center Tip Sheet is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>