

Sentence

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1 2 **Description**

3 The sentence is a core building block of academic writing, enabling writers to make
4 observations and assert propositions, or claims that construct arguments. A basic definition of a
5 sentence is an arrangement of words that includes a subject (often the person or thing that
6 performs an action), and a verb that describes the action (Caplan, 2019). An incomplete sentence,
7 or sentence fragment, may be missing a subject or the standard form of a verb. For example, the
8 sentence “In this context, evidence is defined as a synthesis of best quality scientific studies on a
9 specific topic or research question” (Kitchenham et al., 2009, p. 8) would be incomplete if “is”
10 were dropped because it is a component of the passive verb (“is defined”).

11 Academic sentences often use formal and specialized **academic language** (Biber & Gray,
12 2010) and tend to be longer and more complex than sentences used in other domains. Their
13 structure often ranges beyond from the “subject + verb + object” syntax common in spoken
14 language. Sentence structures can include compound sentences, which are linked by coordinating
15 conjunctions such as “and” “or” “but,” as well as complex sentences, which have subordinate
16 clauses that are introduced by conjunctions, such as “after,” “although,” “even if,” or relative
17 pronouns, such as “who,” “which,” or “where.” For example, in this complex sentence from a
18 study in software engineering, italics identify the subordinate clauses: “Mapping studies can
19 highlight areas *where there is a large amount of research that would benefit from more detailed*
20 *[systematic literature reviews]* and areas *where there is little research that require more*
21 *theoretical and empirical research*” (Kitchenham et al., 2009, p. 12). The first two subordinate
22 clauses are introduced with “where” and refer to “areas.” The last clause begins with “that” and
23 refers to “research.”

24 Academic texts also tend to use the passive voice more than do sentences in other
25 domains, as in this extract from Gosselin et al.'s (2016) article on 3D printing, with the passive
26 forms italicized: “The paper *is organized* as follows. First, the design and processing chain *is*
27 *described*. The material considered for validating this new process route *is presented and tested*
28 in Section 3” (p. 103). The use of the passive voice removes the agent, or actor, and shifts the
29 focus to the process (see **voice**).

30 To show the relationship between items in a sentence that have the same grammatical
31 function and similar structures, the organizing technique of parallelism can be used, as in these
32 italicized examples: “The building path should be *adapted* and *optimized* based on simulation
33 results in order *to take into account constraints* and *to exhibit more robustness* for complex
34 geometries” (Gosselin et al., 2016, p. 103). In this sentence, “adapted” is parallel to “optimized”
35 and “to take into account” is parallel to “to exhibit.”

36 **Variations and Tensions**

37 Sentence structures vary across disciplines for specific reasons. For example, the passive
38 voice is used more in sciences than in the humanities because scientific writing often emphasizes
39 what has been done instead of who has done it (Ahmad, 2012).

40 Long and complex sentences can increase the difficulty of texts for readers. However,
41 short sentences may not enable writers to express complex thoughts (Klimova, 2012). Therefore,
42 many writers vary the length and complexity of their sentences.

43 **Graduate Student Voice**

44 The sentences I write in academic papers are not always long and complicated. My top
45 concern is that they are grammatically correct and that the information flows smoothly. —

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47 **Reflection Questions**

- 48 1. How do the sentences in your discipline's texts use subordinate clauses, parallelism,
49 and active and passive voice?
50 2. Have you received feedback on how you construct sentences? If so, what areas do
51 you want to work on?

52 **For Further Reading**

- 53 Belcher, W. L. (2019). *Writing your journal article in twelve weeks: A guide to academic*
54 *publishing success* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press. The section, "Editing Your
55 Sentences" (pp. 308-328), discusses using verbs, pronouns, and prepositions to express
56 ideas clearly.
57 University of Leicester. (n.d.) *Sentence structure*. [https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/all-](https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/all-resources/writing/grammar/grammar-guides/sentence)
58 [resources/writing/grammar/grammar-guides/sentence](https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/all-resources/writing/grammar/grammar-guides/sentence). This webpage explains types of
59 sentences and how to choose sentence types to express your ideas.

60 **References**

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64 elaboration, explicitness. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 9(1), 2–20.
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