Overview:
Understanding the basic structure of sentences will help you write more clearly and avoid common errors such as fragments, run-on sentences, and comma splices. It will also help you to create sentences that are more complex and stylistically interesting. This will allow you to employ a variety of sentence types, which will help you to personalize the stylistic rhythm of your writing, making it more engaging to your reader. To understand sentence structure, it is important to recognize the differences between independent clauses and dependent clauses (also called subordinate clauses).

Independent Clauses

As the name suggests, independent clauses are independent—they can stand alone. In other words, independent clauses can be complete sentences. They contain a subject and a verb and express a complete thought. With the right punctuation, they can also combine with dependent clauses, phrases, and other independent clauses to create complex and compound sentences.

Examples of independent clauses:

- Jason is tired.
- Lolita had coffee with breakfast.
- Studying in groups helps college students earn better grades.
- The feminist movement in the United States is defined as occurring in three distinct waves.
- Most of the action of the novel takes place in New York.

Dependent Clauses

When it comes to dependent clauses, the name says it all: dependent clauses depend on something else, usually independent clauses, to form complete sentences. They cannot stand alone. A dependent clause contains a subject and a verb, but does not express a complete thought. The most common types of dependent clauses, adverbial clauses and adjective (also called relative) clauses, must be combined with independent clauses in order to avoid creating sentence fragments. (The third type of dependent clause is called a noun clause.)

Because adverbial clauses cause some of the most repeated fragment errors in college writing, this handout focuses on them and their dependency upon independent clauses.

Adverbial clauses are marked by dependent words.

Dependent Words

When a dependent word (also called a subordinating conjunction) occurs at the beginning of a clause, that clause is dependent. Here are some examples of dependent words:
The above is not a complete list, but shows some of the most common subordinating conjunctions.

Examples of dependent clauses attached to independent clauses:

Jason is tired because he only slept for five hours last night.
Lolita had coffee with breakfast after she realized she was out of tea.
Because more time spent studying leads to good grades, those who participate in group-study often excel.
While they are defined by three separate waves, all feminists share the common goal of achieving equality of the sexes.
Although locations are not always obvious in Larsen’s novel, they are always important.

Notice that when the dependent word occurs at the beginning of the sentence, there is a comma after the dependent clause. When the dependent word occurs after the independent clause (in the middle of the sentence), a comma is not necessary.

Style Matters
Now look at your own writing. Focus on one paragraph, and locate independent clauses and dependent clauses in that paragraph. Do you have several independent clauses standing alone as simple sentences? Find two simple sentences and combine them by adding a dependent word to one of them, and a comma if necessary. Make sure, however, that the sentences in your paragraph are not all the same type. Try putting the dependent clause at the beginning of some sentences and the end of others. Remember that variety makes writing more interesting.