

## Common Questions

# What is a Complete Sentence?

### The Short Answer

It's not important to split hairs over what is or is not a "Complete Sentence"; but when your teacher asks you to use them, simply respond by lengthening your Sentences so less Context is required. Be sure to include the Subject (except in Commands), the entire Verb Phrase, and the Direct Object if it is relevant.

In the real world however, *you* will have to be the judge of exactly how much "completeness" your Expressions need. This means being aware of what the listener already knows from the Context, and also understanding whether you are in a more formal or more casual situation.

### The Long Answer

First, it's important to realize that "complete sentences" are not required in language. What's really important is conveying a Complete Thought, which can be done with as little as a grunt or facial expression.

Second, there is no specific, agreed-upon definition of what a "Complete Sentence" actually is. One teacher may use the term to mean a sentence with correct grammar and punctuation, while another may use it to mean a sentence without many of the common omissions, and which is perhaps better suited to formal writing.

#### Ex. What would you like from the store?

- Ex. Tomatoes. <-- A single Word. Not a Complete Sentence.  
Ex. Tomatoes, please. <-- More polite, but still not a Complete Sentence.  
Ex. I would like tomatoes, please. <-- A full Clause. *This* is a Complete Sentence.

People will debate endlessly over whether or not "Yes" is a complete sentence.

#### Ex. Did you feed the dog?

- Ex. Yes. <-- Grammatically correct, but is it "complete"?  
Ex. Yes, I did. <-- More "complete", but still omits part of the Verb Phrase.  
Ex. Yes, I fed the dog. <-- Definitely "complete".

You might also hear terms thrown around like "incomplete sentence", "sentence fragment", and "sentence word". In the examples above, "Tomatoes" is both an "incomplete sentence" and a "sentence fragment" (I suppose they are the same?) and

“Yes” would be a “sentence word”. Are all **Interjections** considered “sentence words”? Is “Ouch!” a “sentence word”?

Who knows. Who cares. These terms are all irrelevant to using language. In language, all that really matters is whether your **Expression** is understood by the listener. In the proper **Context**, “Tomatoes” conveys a **Complete Thought**. So does “Yes”, and “Ouch”. In fact, “Ouch!” always does.

Now if you walk up to someone, and without any **Context**, just say “Tomatoes”, that is obviously *not* a **Complete Thought**, because the listener would have no idea what you are talking about. Some might call this an “incomplete sentence”, but do we really need a special term for what is effectively gibberish?

Unfortunately, defining a “complete sentence” is not as simple as calling it “a **Sentence** that conveys a **Complete Thought**”, since **Sentences** are *already* supposed to convey a **Complete Thought**. You might as well call it a “*proper* sentence” instead.

Despite all this, it’s still useful to define “complete sentence” as a term, because it will come into play inside the classroom (and nowhere else). In fact, you will often hear teachers asking their students to “please write in complete sentences”. In light of this, let’s define the term according to *what teachers usually mean when they say it*.

But before we can get to “complete sentences”, we first need to define a few other important terms. Note that these are *my personal definitions* for these terms. Others may not agree with all of them.

In my grammar, a **Sentence** is a **Grammatical Element** (**Word**, **Phrase**, or **Clause**) that expresses a **Complete Thought**. A **Complete Thought** is a **Thought** that is effectively conveyed to the listener through an **Expression**. It is “complete” *only* if the listener understands it, *and* the **Purpose** behind it.

You might read somewhere that **Sentences** must always be **Clauses**, and not **Phrases** or single **Words**. But this is most definitely not true. The single **Word** “Hello!” expresses a **Complete Thought** all by itself, and so can be considered a **Sentence**. In fact, all the greetings, like “Hello”, “Goodbye”, “Salutations”, and so on, are **Sentences** and can be used in any situation, even in formal writing. Using this definition, **Interjections** like “Ouch!” or “Huh?” can also be considered **Sentences**. They may not be appropriate for formal writing, but they still express a **Complete Thought**.

Finally we must define the term “**Context**”. **Context** is any information that must be combined with a **Grammatical Element** in order to produce its intended meaning.

So now that we've properly defined "Sentence", "Complete Thought", and "Context", we can say that a Complete Sentence is a Sentence that conveys a Complete Thought without relying excessively on Context. This may seem vague (it is), but bear with me. *This really is how most teachers use the term, whether they realize it or not.*

So what, then, would be considered "relying excessively on Context." Well, for one, you cannot use the kind of omission that is typical of an Answer. That means you cannot respond to a Yes/No Question with only a "yes" or "no". Even though some will say that "Yes" *is* a Complete Sentence, *in the classroom it is not*.

**Ex. Did you go shopping yesterday?**

Ex. Yes.

<-- Not a Complete Sentence.

Ex. Yes, I did.

<-- Not...*really* a Complete Sentence.

Ex. Yes, I went shopping yesterday.

<-- A Complete Sentence.

It also means that you cannot omit the final Verb in a Verb Phrase, even when it is understood through Context.

**Ex: Who was going to paint the poster?**

Ex. I was.

<-- Not a Complete Sentence.

Ex. I was going to.

<-- Not a Complete Sentence.

Ex. I was going to paint it.

<-- A Complete Sentence.

Ex. I was going to paint the poster.

<-- A *more* Complete Sentence.

It *also* means you cannot respond to an Open Question with a single Word or Phrase; you need to use a Clause instead.

**Ex. What would you like from the store?**

Ex. Tomatoes, please.

<-- A single Word. Not a Complete Sentence.

Ex. Three tomatoes, please.

<-- A single Phrase. Not a Complete Sentence.

Ex. I would like tomatoes, please.

<-- Oh cool a Clause. A Complete Sentence.

(A Clause is built from a Grammatical Subject, which is *usually* a Noun or Noun Phrase; and a Main Modifier, which is *always* a Verb or Verb Phrase.)

If the Expression involves a Direct Object, you may not omit it from the sentence.

Ex. I finished.

<-- No Direct Object. Not a Complete Sentence.

Ex. I finished my homework.

<-- Contains a Direct Object. A Complete Sentence.

Keep in mind that there is nothing *grammatically wrong* with saying "I finished", but it is not usually considered a Complete Sentence, because without Context we would have no idea what it is you finished.

On the other hand, if there is no obvious **Direct Object** that is important to the **Expression**, you don't need to include one for it to be a **Complete Sentence**. "I slept" could be considered a **Complete Sentence**, because there is no obvious **Direct Object** you are leaving out.

If a **Direct Object** exists, but is not important, then you can *usually* leave it out. "I ate this morning" does not contain a **Direct Object**, even though it *could*, yet it would still, in most cases, be considered a **Complete Sentence**. This is because, as it's not really important what you ate, it doesn't *feel* like you are omitting anything.

**Sentences** that begin with a **Conjunction** (especially "and" and "but") are usually *not* considered **Complete Sentences**, or at the very least are not considered good for formal writing. However, most **Adverbs** (like "additionally" and "however") are considered classier and therefore more acceptable, for whatever reason.

**Sentences** containing **Pronouns** are often referencing something outside of the **Sentence** (which counts as **Context**), but these *may* be considered **Complete Sentences** anyway, depending on the situation. This is because, even in formal writing, using the same **Noun** or **Noun Phrase** over and over is considered redundant and tiresome.

Ex. Susie and I went to a movie. After that, Susie and I had dinner. <-- Redundant

Ex. Susie and I went to a movie. After that, we had dinner. <-- Better

All the above sentences, including the one with "we", would be considered "complete".

That said, there *are* times when your teacher will *not* want you to use **Pronouns**. They may even tell you to "use a complete sentence" instead.

**Ex. How many pancakes would you like?**

Ex. I would like three, please. <-- "Please use a complete sentence."

Ex. I would like three pancakes, please. <-- "Good job!"

Some people would consider the first answer to be a **Complete Sentence**, but the second answer is still a *more* **Complete Sentence**, which might be preferred in a classroom setting. It really all depends on the teacher.

And this gets into the crux of what **Complete Sentences** are really all about. The main purpose of using **Complete Sentences** is to improve the clarity of your writing and speaking. Often a teacher will ask you to "speak in complete sentences" simply because they don't understand what your **Expression** was referencing, or because they think it might be hard for *others* to understand.

**Student:** “Joe talked to Bill before he went to work.”

**Teacher:** “Before *who* went to work? Joe or Bill? Use a complete sentence please.”

Again, too much “completeness” can feel redundant and tiresome, but students usually err on the side of “not enough”, and so teachers will tend to push them in the other direction.

There is another, secondary goal of encouraging **Complete Sentences**, and that is to help you get more practice using the language. That may be the reason teachers like them so much. (When I was a kid, the teachers had us use **Complete Sentences** just so we could practice our cursive writing.)

In the same vein, simple **Commands** like “Stop” and “Go”, which are grammatically correct, are often not considered **Complete Sentences** in the classroom, simply because the teacher wants you to use longer sentences for practice. In these situations, it’s better to add exactly *what* you want the person to “Stop”, or *where* you want them to “Go”.

Ex. Go, please.

<-- “Please use a complete sentence.”

Ex. Go to the front of the line, please.

<-- “Good job!”

By the way, I said before that adding the **Subject** is necessary for a sentence to be considered “complete”, but in the case of **Commands** they are optional, since “you” is already so strongly implied in all **Commands**. However, sometimes you’ll find that **including** the **Subject** in a **Command** can add more clarity to an **Expression**, so you’ll have to decide yourself if it’s appropriate or not.

Ex. Go to the front of the line.

<-- Omitted **Subject**

Ex. You go to the front of the line.

<-- Included **Subject**

Ex. You and Joe go to the front of the line.

<-- Included **Subject**

Finally, when making **Expressions** outside of the classroom, it is important to know the level of formality of the situation you are in. If it’s a casual situation, you will not be expected to use any more words than absolutely necessary. If it is a very formal situation, you might be expected to use more words, in order to increase the clarity of your **Expression**. Generally speaking, short, casual **Expressions** are easier to make, and harder to understand. In formal situations (like in a courtroom for instance), we tend to show deference to the listener by using *longer* **Expressions**, which are *easier* to understand. Somewhere between “casual” and “formal” is the “informal” or “polite” style, which is good for speaking to people you don’t very well.

So we see that in the end, the term “**Complete Sentence**” is largely defined by tradition, and this tradition is based on encouraging clarity of speech in the classroom. It’s not important to split hairs over what is or is not a “**Complete Sentence**”; but when your teacher asks you to use them, simply respond by lengthening your **Sentences** so less **Context** is required. Be sure to include the **Subject** (except in **Commands**), the entire **Verb Phrase**, and the **Direct Object** if it is relevant.

In the real world however, *you* will have to be the judge of exactly how much “completeness” your **Expressions** need. This means being aware of what the listener already knows from the **Context**, and also understanding whether you are in a more formal or more casual situation.