

Edgar H. Schuster

# A Fresh Look at Sentence Fragments

Challenging the idea that students should be taught to avoid all sentence fragments, Edgar H. Schuster investigated the abundant use of fragments in two volumes of *The Best American Essays*. He suggests ways students might learn to use fragments effectively.

**S**entence fragments have long been a form that most teachers try to eradicate from student writing. However well intentioned this may be, does it help students become better writers of non-fiction? Partly to answer this question, I examined the fifty essays reprinted in *The Best American Essays, 2001* (Norris and Atwan) and *The Best American Essays, 2003* (Fadiman and Atwan).

It was exciting to observe the range of the syntactic resources these writers called on and used effectively. They include some things we English teachers commonly teach against, such as comma splices, single-sentence paragraphs, even occasional rambling sentences. But what struck me far more

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forcefully was the extent to which these essayists used *sentence fragments*. At the outset, it should be said that the backbone of virtu-

ally every essay in these collections is the complete, well-formed English sentence. Nevertheless, I found 505 sentence fragments in the fifty essays.

This is not the place to discuss in detail how I decided whether a stretch of words between a capital letter and a terminal punctuation mark was a fragment or not (it is not as simple a judgment as one might suppose), but I do want to emphasize that my figures are conservative. For instance, imperatives are sometimes considered fragments, but I classified them as full sentences. Where compound sentences consisted of a fragment plus an independent clause, they were nearly always considered full sentences. I did not count any dialogue. And, elliptical verb phrases were not considered fragments, even when the ellipsis was

severe, for example, “I would and I did.” Had dialogue and this last item been included, the number of fragments would have multiplied dramatically.

Five hundred and five fragments in fifty articles averages to 10.1 fragments per article, but perhaps a more meaningful measure is the number of fragments per page, which is 0.93. Figure 1 is a tabulation of the six most heavily fragmented articles, followed by the six least heavily fragmented. The page length of the articles was determined after subtracting all quoted material and all dialogue from each article’s length.

Clearly, some writers are fragment-averse, but others might be described as fragment-prone.

The *New Yorker* has representation in both groups. In general, editorial policy does not seem to be an influence on fragment density. The authors, not the editors, favor or eschew sentence fragments. Author choice seems to prevail at *Harper’s*, also. Two of the six most fragment-dense articles appeared in *Harper’s*, yet two other *Harper’s* essays in these collections had densities well below the overall 0.93 average. The fragment densities of the five articles from the *American Scholar* range from 0.24 to 2.70. It may be time for English teachers to reconsider the value of sentence fragments.

## Try This Test

Before going further on this topic, I invite the reader’s participation. Figure 2 lists six pairs of passages. Each pair begins with a passage from *The Best American Essays* collections containing one or two fragments. These are headed “Fragment” or “Fragments.” (I have boldfaced the fragments.) The second passage in each pair, headed “Sentence” or

FIGURE 1. Most and Least Use of Fragments in Fifty of *The Best American Essays* (2001 and 2003)

Author and Magazine	Fragments per Page	Number of Fragments	Page Length
Mary Oliver ( <i>Shenandoah</i> )	4.3	9	2.1
John Edgar Wideman ( <i>Harper's</i> )	4.2	36	8.5
Frederic Morton ( <i>Harper's</i> )	3.3	38	11.6
David Michaelis ( <i>American Scholar</i> )	2.7	37	13.7
Andre Aciman ( <i>Harvard Review</i> )	2.6	39	14.9
Donald Antrim ( <i>New Yorker</i> )	2.3	38	16.2
Bert O. States ( <i>Gettysburg Review</i> )	0.0	0	10.5
Ashraf Rushdy ( <i>Transition</i> )	0.0	0	7.7
Jeffrey Heiman ( <i>Massachusetts Review</i> )	0.0	0	6.5
Ian Frazier ( <i>New Yorker</i> )	0.0	0	3.3
Reynolds Price ( <i>Forbes ASAP</i> )	0.08	1	13.0
Judith Thurman ( <i>New Yorker</i> )	0.10	1	10.3

“Sentences,” is a full-sentence rendering of the same idea. Study the contrasts. What conclusions do you draw about the effectiveness of the fragments? (Note: In these as well as all subsequent citations, the year of the essay appears first [2001 or 2003], followed by the page number on which the quotation appears.)

In every case, the fragments express the same idea as the sentences and do so in fewer words—significantly fewer, in several cases. In every case, too, the fragments are more emphatic. (Of course, whether an author wants emphasis is a matter for him or her to decide.) Thirdly, the fragments are almost always more natural, more like conversational English. We often ask questions in elliptical sentences, for example, and, even more frequently, we answer them elliptically. (Here, again, an author’s tone is his or her choice.)

On the basis of this evidence, we might ask the question: Can one be in favor of economy of wording, emphasis, and naturalness of expression and be against the use of sentence fragments?

### Are Fragments Truly Nonsentences?

Rei R. Noguchi remarks that the kinds of fragments students write reveal that they *understand* syntax. There is no doubt that the kinds of fragments professional writers use reveal the same understanding. In a landmark study of fragments used in formal writing, Charles R. Kline Jr. and W. Dean Memering argue that what are typically called fragments should instead be referred to as “minor sentences” and should be distinguished from true fragments, that is, “broken sentences” (109). Their schema divides “Written Units” into “(Major) Sentence,” “Minor Sentence,” and “Frag-

ment” (108). Contemporary scholarly grammarians such as Randolph Quirk et al. and Sidney Greenbaum tend to avoid the term *sentence fragment*. In *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, Quirk et al. use the major headings “Irregular sentences” and “Nonsentences” under which to discuss what most English teachers call fragments (838; 849). In *The Oxford English Grammar*, Greenbaum speaks of “incomplete” sentences and “elliptical” sentences. He says of the latter, “they are perfectly normal and acceptable. They are subject to rules” (309).

**There are rules of grammar, to be sure, but there are also rules of rhetoric. Should grammar rules trump rhetorical rules invariably?**

### Rules for Writing Sentence Fragments

The notion that there are *rules* for writing sentence fragments might trouble those who think that fragments violate rules. But there are rules and there are rules. There are rules of grammar, to be sure, but there are also rules of rhetoric. Should grammar rules trump rhetorical rules invariably?

An eleventh-grade student who opened her essay, “Sweet sixteen. Ahhh . . . driver’s license, car, new found freedom and independence,” was thinking in terms of effectiveness rather than grammar. And the teachers who gave her the highest possible score on the state writing test were thinking that way, too. Not one of them remarked that the student had opened her essay with a pair of sentence fragments (Schuster 94). Kline and Memering suggest that if teachers read student papers rapidly, attending to the substance of the sentences, fragments would “largely disappear” (109).

FIGURE 2. Contrasts in Fragment Pairs

**Pair One**

Fragment: "The wounds of that time are really healed now." **Perhaps.** (2001: 104)  
 Sentence: "The wounds of that time are really healed now." Perhaps they are healed.

**Pair Two**

Fragment: That is why photographs . . . can count as evidence. **But evidence of what?** (2003: 257)  
 Sentence: That is why photographs . . . can count as evidence. But what are they evidence of?

**Pair Three**

Fragments: There were several [dreams]. **The fish dreams. Also the dream of amputation.** (2001: 197)  
 Sentence: There were several [dreams]. There were the fish dreams, and also the dream of amputation.

**Pair Four**

Fragments: . . . "they [Martha Stewart's linens] weren't as soft as [Ralph] Lauren's or Calvin Klein's." **Why? Because the thread count was too low. . . .** (2003: 72)  
 Sentences: . . . they [Martha Stewart's linens] weren't as soft as Lauren's or Calvin Klein's. Why weren't they as soft? They weren't as soft because the thread count was too low.

**Pair Five**

Fragments: **Cotton top pad? Or latex?** (2003: 24)  
 Sentence: One could choose a cotton top pad or a latex.

**Pair Six**

Fragment: More important, I *answered* e-mail fast. . . . **No more guilt!** (2001: 55)  
 Sentence: More important, I *answered* e-mail fast. . . . I no longer felt the guilt I had felt with regular mail.

In fact, most fragments do "disappear" whenever we read for meaning, even for many conservative English teachers. A high school English teacher told me during a workshop not long ago that there were no fragments in *her* favorite magazine: *Time*. Two days later, in a physician's office, I examined a copy of that magazine. There were eight fragments in the lead article alone.

Using examples from *The Best American Essays* collections, here are a few suggested rules for making effective sentence fragments.

**To create a dramatic pause for emphasis, use a period instead of some other mark of punctuation (or, more rarely, no punctuation at all) before a sentence-terminating element.**

The essays are rife with this "punctuation device," as Quirk et al. call it. Here are some examples. Following each example I have suggested a more traditional punctuation.

It has the look of something a twelve-year-old would do. And enjoy doing. (2001: 37) [no punctuation]

The sounds of the machines were still inside my head. The clanging punctuated by Frank's voice. (2001: 140) [comma]

I came looking for what I could take from it. Details for a novel in progress. (2001: 164) [colon]  
 It wasn't on the road; it was on the shoulder. My shoulder. (2001: 121) [dash]

Notice the variation in the kinds of structures that may be isolated.

**To create intense emphasis and succinctness, delete all but one of the major elements of an independent clause.**

As opposed to the first rule, the fragment following the full sentence in these cases is not a constituent of the sentence that precedes it. It is best viewed as an independent clause. Here are examples:

I drew back on the syringe. Nothing. (2003: 86)  
*Nothing* is the subject of an elliptical sentence (*Nothing happened*).

Another word is passing; the vocabulary available to the writer is shrinking. Hard to bear. (2001: 271–72)

In this example, the subject and verb (*this is*) are deleted. This is a common strategy in the essays. Quite often, as in this case, the deleted verb is a *be* verb.

In a large number of fragments from the essay collections, a *there* or *here* or a pronoun-subject plus

a linking verb are omitted. Here are some examples. I have added the deleted material in brackets.

The boardwalk at Cranesville wanders for about a half mile out toward a clump of tamaracks where it slips underwater. No gate, no warning sign, no *This is the end! Turn around!* (2001: 117; italics in original) [There is]

A common enough story. (2003: 315) [This is]

**To emphasize the individual items in a list or series, use a period rather than a comma between them.**

The biggest surprise for me in this research was how frequently writers employed this rule. The items in the list range widely. They may be short words or phrases:

. . . one could sort these scents in rows and categories: by herbs; flowers; fruits; spices; woods. Or by places. By people. By loves. (2003: 7)

They may be intermediate in length:

He'd show me things. The foundations of a settler's cabin down the hill. The little collapsed house he and his first wife lived in along the arroyo. An old Indian village. (2001: 38)

At the extreme, fragmented lists may be long indeed. John Edgar Wideman lists the ways that he considers the war in Afghanistan to be "a phony war" in a series of four fragments, each quite lengthy and each (except the first) a self-contained paragraph (2003: 323–24). The passages consume twenty-one lines and are nearly two hundred words in length. In "India's American Imports," Adam Hochschild writes a six-fragment paragraph over two hundred words long, one that lists some of the many ways that things hidden in Western society suddenly become visible in India (2001: 101–02).

In the fifty essays, there are only two instances of bulleting for lists and only two of enumeration. These essayists seem to prefer fragments to either of these more businesslike devices.

**To achieve a more natural, conversational tone as well as economy of expression, express questions in fragmented form.**

There are seventy-nine fragmented interrogatives in the corpus, a large category by any measure, and it is not hard to see why: A fragmented question is often far more natural than a fully phrased one, *and* it is often far more economical. Compare the frag-

mented interrogatives below with the full-sentence rewrites given in brackets:

Our minds, of course, automatically filter much of this hubbub. But at what cost? (2001: 109) [But at what cost do they filter it?]

Only languages with state sponsorship seem likely to survive: Spanish, French, English, Italian, etc. What of the more than 800 languages of Papua New Guinea? (2001: 271) [What can be said regarding the survival of the more than 800 languages of Papua New Guinea?]

**For naturalness and economy, also express responses to questions in fragmented form.**

Though many interrogatives are expressed in fragmentary form by the writers of *The Best American Essays*, many are full sentences as well. With responses, though, fragmentation is even more natural. Indeed, repeating a question as part of an answer is usually quite unnatural, as the bracketed versions of the following fragmented responses will show:

Am I jealous that these people have been able to make more sense of Barth and Pynchon than I have? Probably. (2001: 98) [I probably am jealous of them.]

. . . "they weren't as soft as [Ralph] Lauren's or Calvin Klein's." Why? Because the thread count was too low. . . . (2003: 72) [They weren't as soft as Lauren's or Calvin Klein's because the thread count was too low.]

**To give additional emphasis to negatives, isolate them as fragments.**

By my count, this device is used thirty-two times in the fifty essays.

Never deny desire. Not once. (2001: 45)

Windows were boarded. Not a stalk of bamboo anywhere. (2001: 156)

We ain't going nowhere, as the boys in the hood be saying. Nowhere. (2003: 322)

**To make exclamations more terse, use their fragmentary form.**

Exclamations are emphatic by nature, an effect furthered when exclamation marks are employed. Nevertheless, writers often opt to express exclamations in fragmentary form.

It is interesting to note that fragmented exclamations may be mixed with unfragmented. In the following illustration, a fragmented exclamation is

### SHOULD STUDENTS LEARN THE RULES BEFORE THEY BREAK THEM?

The notion that it is all right for students to break rules occasionally, but *only* after they have learned them, has been expressed by many wiser heads than mine—E. B. White, for one. (White himself used fragments plentifully, even in his *Elements of Style*.) However, where writing fragments is concerned, there are many issues to be considered before we accept this advice.

- > Linguists believe that native speakers have intuitive knowledge of what constitutes a sentence. In an important way, then, students already know the rules for forming grammatically complete sentences.
- > That professional writers use fragments as frequently as they do casts some doubt on whether there is a “rule” against writing fragments. There is clearly no such rule at the *Atlantic*, *American Scholar*, *Harper’s*, *Time*, the *New York Times*—or *English Journal*, for that matter.
- > In oral language learning, kids often break the rules *before* they learn them. It may be that breaking them is a stage in learning them. The same seems to be true for at least some aspects of the written language, notably punctuation (Weaver 59–62).
- > There are practical problems: When a given student writes a fragment, how do we know if he or she knows “the rules” or not?
- > And, assuming that a given fragment is rhetorically effective, are we going to impose a double standard? Will we applaud some students—those who “know the rules”—and penalize others?

followed by a full-sentence exclamation, which in turn is followed by another fragment.

Against company policy! She’d make an exception in my case! Though not for a full refund! (2003: 34)

Here is an unusual fragmented exclamation, because it is enclosed in parentheses:

Wordsworth singled out the blunting of mind produced by “daily” events and “hourly” news of “extraordinary incident.” (In 1800!) (2003: 269)

The author of these two sentences is Susan Sontag, as inventive a nonfiction stylist as can be found in these collections. (We shall miss her. Deeply.) The fragment density of her article, by the way, is 0.9—putting her just a breath below the average.

### A Few Additional Fragment Categories

We are all familiar with structures such as, “the more, the merrier,” and probably think of them as fragments. Quirk et al. call them “aphoristic sentences,” and list them in their “irregular sentences” group (843). I found twelve of these in the essays, all of which were notably longer than the aphoristic sentences Quirk et al. list. Here are a few examples:

But the farther west I got and the more I knew about the cats, the more I trusted their protection. (2001: 87)

. . . I would like to be more like her. Less needy, more protective of private fears and desires. (2001: 176)

The farther away from Bag End Bilbo went, the more purely he inhabited the world of adventure, and even of epic. (2003: 280)

*What/How* constructions are recognized as another category by Quirk et al. and by Kline and Memering. I found fifteen in my sample. Some examples:

What pride I took, following her death, in doing . . . . (2001: 72)

To turn from the east. How curious. (2001: 114)

Isolated *which*-clauses have long been considered fragments in most textbooks. There were eight of these in the essays, all from the 2003 collection. In every example, *which* stands for the whole idea expressed in the preceding sentence. Examples:

“Do you want me to try them one more time?” Which is what we—and increasingly, I, alone—did. (2003: 19)

The result was impractical in the extreme, and very, very pretty. Which is a fair summation of many Stewart projects. (2003: 75)

Although the use of *which* to refer to a preceding clause rather than to a noun phrase has traditionally been considered an error, the *Oxford English Dictionary*

cites examples of this usage from at least the end of the fourteenth century. The usage has become increasingly common in our best magazines and newspapers.

### Miscellaneous Fragments

The marvelously inventive writers chosen for *The Best American Essays* are, not surprisingly, also inventive in their use of fragments. In all, I was unable to fit twenty-six fragments into any of the categories that I have discussed. Here are some examples of the most inventive.

After quoting in full the letter of a former student, Carlo Rotella summarizes it in the following paragraph:

Seduction, proper conditioning and practice, a lack of transcendence, bigger fish to fry, a reapportioning of resources: a college man's romance with boxing in brief. (2001: 259)

Another curious fragment is used by Donald Antrim. After quoting eleven lines from *Macbeth*, he writes, after an indentation:

And: (2003: 31)

Then he quotes six more lines from the same scene.

Finally, Francis Spufford, in discussing how he first learned to read *The Hobbit*, writes this paragraph:

I. N. In. A. In a. H, o, l, e. In a hole. I, n, t, b, e, g, r, o, u, n, d. In a hole in the ground. L-i-v-e-d-a-h-o-b-b-i-t. In a hole in the ground lived a hobbit . . . And then I never stopped [reading] again. (2003: 279)

Nearly a generation has passed since Kline and Memering suggested that English teachers drop the term *fragment* and use the term *minor sentence*. Will it take another generation before we get in step with the practices of our best essayists, who, as this research has revealed, use on the average nearly one minor sentence per page and who may use more than four?

### Coda: In the English Classroom

What is an English teacher to do with this information? Should we “teach fragments”? If so, how, when, and to whom?

As always, much (indeed, nearly everything) depends on the teacher and the particular classes he or she is teaching. In general, I would think high school is the place for this, but I would never penalize *any* student for writing a rhetorically effective fragment.

The lesson could be taught, much as I have done here (“Try This Test”), by comparing effective fragments to grammatically complete rewrites. This inductive lesson plan will allow students to see for themselves how useful fragments can be. Another alternative might be to teach some of the fragment rules that I have suggested. The students could be encouraged to find illustrations of the rules. In either of these lessons, the fragments to be studied may come from the literature students are reading, from magazines, from the daily newspaper, or even perhaps from their writing.

Martha Kolln's wonderful book, *Rhetorical Grammar*, has the subtitle, *Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects*. Writing a fragment/minor sentence rather than a grammatically complete one (major sentence) is a grammatical choice and, as I hope I have demonstrated, that choice can have positive, powerful rhetorical effects. We must not forever exclude this writerly choice from students' revision tool kits. Rather than—as the *Harbrace College Handbook* (Hodges et al.) recommends—asking students to proofread their work for fragments and “correct” those that cannot be justified, how about asking them to examine complete sentences to discover whether fragments would express the same thought more effectively? I would remind everyone, however, that like any rhetorical choice, this one can be overdone. Five hundred and five fragments in fifty essays is a large number, but the number of well-formed sentences in those same essays is many, many times greater.

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