

Sentence structure for IELTS and English for Academic Purposes

Simple Sentences

In English writing, all sentences follow this sentence structure (Subject ⇒ Verb) and are completed with the use of a full stop or period.

Subject ⇒ Verb.

S	V	
IELTS	is	a language proficiency test.
A pencil	is	a medium for writing or drawing.

The subject always precedes the verb except when the order is reversed as in a question

Verb ⇒ Subject?

V	S	
Is	IELTS	a language proficiency test?
Is	a pencil	an effective medium for writing or drawing?

The subject can be one word but is more commonly a string of words that center around a noun. The verb indicates the action, the state or links the subject to other information and can be more than one word.

Other sentence elements or parts of speech can appear before or after the Subject ⇒ Verb structure.

	S	V	
Between 1955 and 1975	overall gross domestic production	increased	in the majority of western economies.
	A pencil	is	a medium for writing or drawing.

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Often, the subject can be made of many words.

S	V	
Most of the significant hospital changes	are seen	in the layout development and increase in patient parking.
The use of individual and focus groups	is	useful for gaining an understanding of general public opinion.

However, both the subject and the verb can be just one word each.

S	V	
It	is	obvious predicted figures for all categories are likely to increase.
It	is	certain that EV vehicles cannot provide a complete solution to the environmental issues of personal transportation.

In IELTS, and especially in EAP, many sentences may follow a more complicated pattern than this simple pattern.

Complex sentences

Many sentences can contain more than one Subject ⇒ Verb structure or 'clause'.

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One of these subject/verb structures (clauses) will contain the main or central meaning and will can be understood alone.

Dependent Clause		Independent Clause	
S	V	S	V
Although the findings of past studies	show some cost savings,	recent developments	may have increased the overall efficiency in the sector.
S	V	S	V
While global health education	has increased in the developed world,	rates of obesity and a general decline in fitness	are increasing worldwide

The main part of the sentence is known as the main clause or the independent clause.

In our example, you can see the main (independent clause) and the dependent clause which has no meaning by itself.

The independent clause (main) can come before the dependent part.

Independent		
S	V	
Developed societies	tend to be	more interested in with material concerns

Dependent			
	S	V	
whereas	'less developed' societies	have	an interest in family and tradition.

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Or it can appear after

Dependent			
	S	V	
In contrast to	less developed societies which	have	an interest in family and tradition,

Independent		
S	V	
developing societies	have	a tendency to be more interested in material concerns.

The dependent part of a complex sentence is usually preceded by a word or phrase that supplies additional meaning to the sentence such as:

although, even though, if, even if, in contrast to, when, because, as, since, whereas, while among others.

Compound sentences

In these examples, there are two Subject ⇒ Verb structures and unlike complex sentences, both of these subject/verb structures can have meaning alone as they can both be independent (main) clauses.

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To join these sentence words like and, but, or, because or so may be used.

S	V
It	is a good idea to provide additional online-resources for students to access

however

S	V	
they	may not utilize these	without signposting and encouragement.

	S	V	
<i>While</i>	online resources	are	a good idea in principle,

S	V	
a tutor	may need	to signpost and encourage students to use these

because

S	V	
students	may not use	these resources effectively.

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Student writing problems relating to sentence structure

Two common problems in writing happen when dependent sentences are written as complete sentences with a full stop:

While online resources are a good idea in principle, a tutor may need to signpost and encourage students to use these. Students may not use these resources effectively. X

*While online resources are a good idea in principle, a tutor may need to signpost and encourage students to use these **because** students may not use these resources effectively.*

Or when two independent sentences are written as one sentence, but without the addition of a joining word.

It is a good idea to provide additional online-resources for students to access, they may not utilize these without signposting and encouragement. X

*It is a good idea to provide additional online-resources for students to access **as** they may not utilize these without signposting and encouragement.*

Adapted from (Oxford EAP, 2013)