Complete Sentences

What is a complete sentence?
A complete sentence needs a subject and a verb. In each sentence, these two parts answer the question Who (or what) does what?

What makes a sentence incomplete?
Incomplete sentences are missing either a subject or a verb (or both). Often, an incomplete sentence is relying on the sentence before or after it to make sense. This doesn’t work. Each sentence needs its own subject and verb.

- My cat likes to sleep in cardboard boxes. Also to climb her cat tree. ❌

Sentence two is incomplete—it’s relying on the first sentence to make sense. To be complete, the second sentence needs its own subject and verb. It needs to tell us who does what.

- My cat likes to sleep in cardboard boxes. She also likes to climb her cat tree. ✔

What if the subject and verb are the same for both sentences?
You may be to combine two sentences with the same subject and verb (with some rewording).

- My cat likes to sleep in cardboard boxes and climb her cat tree. ✔

In the example, why can’t her be the subject?
Also to climb her cat tree. ❌

Her cannot be a subject because it can’t do what the verb says. It describes ownership, but since it can’t perform an action, it can’t be the subject.

- Her waved to her friend. ❌
- She waved to her friend. ✔
In the example, why can’t to climb her cat tree be the verb?

*To climb* is an infinitive, which means it’s made of the words *to* + *simple verb* (*to hike, to walk, to jump*). Infinitives describe actions, but because they aren’t doing the action, they aren’t verbs. However, they can be subjects!

| To fly is a wonderful thing. To paint is to see the world anew. |

Don’t some authors use incomplete sentences?

Of course. All the time. (See what we did there?) Incomplete sentences can create a punchy, staccato effect. However, that effect is purposeful, and it may not be appropriate for all audiences, genres, and purposes. Academic papers avoid incomplete sentences.

More examples:

On my hike, I saw lots of trees. *And rivers.* ✗

On my hike, I saw lots of trees and rivers. ✓

Dogs love outdoor activities. Such as going for walks and fetching sticks. ✗

Dogs love outdoor activities, such as going for walks and fetching sticks. ✓

Dogs love outdoor activities. *They love* going for walks and fetching sticks. ✓

The cat had one goal. To find the best spot in the house to take a nap. ✗

The cat had one goal: to find the best spot in the house to take a nap. ✓

The cat had one goal. *That goal was* to find the best spot in the house to take a nap. ✓

According to my brother. The pizza there tastes great. ✗

According to my brother, *the pizza* there tastes great. ✓