A Syntactical Analysis of Sentence Fragments in *No Country for Old Men* and *Ulysses*

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This article draws on existing literature to develop a more nuanced understanding of sentence fragments and how they can be implemented in writing while maintaining clarity. According to these parameters, select passages containing sentence fragments from Ulysses *and* No Country for Old Men *are then analyzed with the goal of exposing why some sentence fragments in the former are disorienting, whereas those in the latter are more easily comprehensible. Ultimately, the article concludes that* Ulysses *seems to shun certain guidelines of clarity while* No Country *adheres to them, though they both use sentence fragments to achieve their rhetorical goals.*

The sentence fragment. It is a bugbear for English teachers and a boogeyman for student writers, yet it is still frequently used in accomplished literary prose. What are we to make of this seeming discrepancy? In an attempt to shed some light on this perennial grammatical conundrum, we will first lay out some commonly accepted rules for clarity when writing with sentence fragments. Then we will go on to show that sentence fragments can be and are used effectively in English literature, and we will examine the usage of sentence fragments in select passages of two different novels, *No Country for Old Men* and *Ulysses*, with the intent to identify whether the selected sentence fragments adhere to established rules of clarity.

The Rules of Using Sentence Fragments

First, we will attempt to define the notion of "sentence fragment" based on what grammarians have said on the subject. It seems relatively easy to distinguish sentence fragments in a grammatical sense; nearly every grammar website notes that sentence fragments are demarcated as single sentences with end punctuation and capitalization, but they lack some essential clause element. This omission supposedly renders them incorrect and incomplete. However, this textbook definition of sentence fragments does not begin to cover the way that sentence fragments are actually used.

To develop a more nuanced understanding of sentence fragments, we must first recognize that the spoken and written linguistic constructions we use consist of both sentences and non-sentences. Charles R. Kline Jr. and W. Dean Memering explore this distinction, suggesting that "minor sentences" make up the majority of non-sentence constructions we use (1977, p. 12). Minor sentences lack essential clause elements (Kline & Memering, 1977, p. 13). Minor sentences are typically subjects and verbs that stand alone from "major sentences" (that is, grammatically complete sentences containing both an independent subject and a verb), but minor sentences carry an implied subject or

verb based on the previous sentence or the speaker's context (Kline & Memering, 1977, p. 13). Eugene Nida gives an example of two minor sentences as utilized in a spoken interaction:

"How much for these?"

  "Fifty cents a dozen." (Nida, 1966, as cited in Kline, 1976, p. 4)

According to our initial definition, both of these would be sentence fragments, since they both lack essential clause elements. The first lacks a verb, whereas the second seems to lack both a verb and a subject complement (assuming that this phrase would function as a subject in a construction such as "fifty cents a dozen is how much they cost"). However, because they would make sense in context, we can call these minor sentences rather than sentence fragments. In the above example, the latter phrase refers contextually to the item implied in the first phrase. Rather than replying with a grammatically complete sentence, the speaker simply states the subject, assuming that the listener would understand the implied clause elements in context.

Kline (1976) concludes that in writing, minor sentences are perfectly acceptable, but he asserts a condition: "Dependent Minor Sentences should be contiguously placed and related to either an Independent Minor Sentence or a (Major) Sentence" (p. 7). It is the combination of sentence fragments with related coherent sentences that renders them comprehensible and thereby "minor sentences." If sentences that are missing a clause element are *not* placed contiguously with appropriate complete sentences, Kline and Memering (1977) propose that we call them "broken sentences" (p. 13). We will refer to both minor sentences and broken sentences as "sentence fragments" for the remainder of this article.

When writers use sentence fragments in creative fiction, do they adhere to Kline's rule? We will investigate this by examining select passages of two different novels: *No Country for Old Men* (hereafter *No Country*) and *Ulysses*.

Sentence Fragments in *No Country*

No Country is a 2005 novel by Cormac McCarthy. McCarthy is known to employ stripped-down style choices in his narratives, with his prose being described as consisting of "direct, almost scriptural language" which includes many sentence fragments (Johnson, 2019, para. 3). Here is a short passage with the fragments numbered and italicized, taken from a scene where the main character, Moss, stumbles upon a crime scene:

> [Moss] raised his head and looked out across the bajada. [1] *A light wind from the north.* [2] *Cool.* [3] *Sunny.* [4] *One oclock in the afternoon.* He looked at the man lying dead in the grass. [5] *His good crocodile boots that were filled with blood and turning black.* [6] *The end of his life.* [7] *Here in this place.* [8] *The distant mountains to the south.* [9] *The wind in the grass.* [10] *The quiet.* (McCarthy, 2005, p. 18)

There are ten sentence fragments in this short passage, but it still reads quite easily. Fragments 1–4 seem to tie in closely with the first complete sentence. "A light wind from the north" is a detail that is clearly connected with his survey of the landscape suggested in the previous sentence. His next two fragments are simply adjectives which note other details that tie in thematically with the previous dependent minor sentence. Because they are presented in succession with the minor sentence, they clearly serve to further describe the scene. Rather than including some redundant variation of "it was," we can assume that many of these sentence fragments are simply Moss taking in and categorizing the world around him in the form of simple noun phrases. The same is true for fragments 8–10; the scenic details of less importance are presented as economically as possible and in immediate succession.

Fragment 5, the longest fragment, is still a descriptive noun phrase, but now the content does not have to do with the scenery but with the real object of Moss's attention: the crime scene. This longer fragment seems to signal a shift in Moss's perception from simple categorization of the scene to inductive appraisal of what occurred there.

Fragments 6 and 7 especially stand out when compared with the other sentence fragments in this passage. They do not supply tangential details about the setting. Instead, we get a noun phrase (fragment 6) followed by an adverbial phrase (fragment 7), both of which would form a coherent sentence if they were linked with any verb meaning "occur." The prepositional phrase clearly modifies the preceding noun phrase. The close syntactic relation of these sentences sets them apart from the rest of the sentence fragments. This seems to be because the meaningful content of fragments 6 and 7 is more important than the extraneous and largely omittable survey-oriented noun phrases; the main content of this passage has to do with the dead body and Moss's consideration of what events led to its being there.

Thus we can see that in this passage, McCarthy utilizes a lot of sentence fragments, yet they follow logical rules. Especially when sentence fragments carry important information, they are syntactically and thematically related to comprehensible sentences in order to preserve clarity. If sentence fragments contain relatively extraneous details, they are presented consecutively alongside more readily comprehensible fragments. The most important information is presented in complete sentences. We can thereby see a fulfillment of Kline's (1976) condition that sentence fragments must be placed alongside complete sentences or related sentence fragments in order to maintain clarity.

Sentence Fragments in *Ulysses*

The second novel which we will examine is *Ulysses* by James Joyce, which is known for its comparatively dense and experimental prose style and that also frequently uses fragments. This passage, in which a character reflects on his dead mother, contains six sentence fragments:

In a dream, silently, she had come to him, her wasted body within its loose graveclothes giving off an odour of wax and rosewood, her breath, bent over him with mute secret words, a faint odour of wetted ashes.

[1] *Her glazing eyes, staring out of death, to shake and bend my soul.* [2] *On me alone.* [3] *The ghostcandle to light her agony.* [4] *Ghostly light on the tortured face.* [5] *Her hoarse loud breath rattling in horror, while all prayed on their knees.* [6] *Her eyes on me to strike me down.* (Joyce, 1946, p. 12)

There are six sentence fragments in this passage compared to the nine in *No Country,* but here they do not read smoothly—they cause the reader to stumble and backtrack, creating a much more disorienting experience. This is due largely to a lack of finite verbs, arbitrary isolation of prepositional phrases, and use of pronouns that have no apparent antecedent.

Fragment 1 is almost a complete independent clause, but an infinitive verb is used instead of a tensed verb, rendering it a complex noun phrase with the head noun "eyes." The same is true for fragment 6; it has a highly similar structure and the same head noun. Sentence fragment 3 is similarly disorienting; we would expect the verb "light" to be finite here, but instead it is an infinitive, creating another noun phrase.

Sentence fragment 2, a lone prepositional phrase, seems to connect thematically with fragment 1, but it does not connect syntactically because "on" would have to come before the nonfinite modifier "to shake and bend my soul." Fragments 4 and 5, however, each connect a prepositional phrase to the noun phrase each modifies, so the isolation of "on me alone" in fragment 2 is particularly disorienting.

Fragment 5 is perhaps the most incomprehensible in the passage, as it contains several pronouns that do not refer to any obvious antecedent. Usually, pronouns replace a clear antecedent, but there is nothing in this sentence or passage that suggests what "all" and "their" refer to. This means that this sentence fragment contains two examples of ambiguous pronoun reference.

The sentence that begins the above passage ties the other fragments together thematically but not syntactically. These fragments are not placed in proximity to a comprehensible independent clause on which they can rely for implied syntactic elements and semantic context. Because

the sentence fragments in this passage are connected only thematically, they violate Kline's (1976) rule.

That said, are we to conclude that Joyce's writing is poor or somehow flawed? Absolutely not—partly because there is a myriad of literature professors that would disagree, but also because we must consider that creative writing affords a writer license to prioritize stylistic choices over conventionally accepted axioms of clarity. The sentence fragments that Joyce uses seem to suggest a retreat into an unstable character's inner psyche, so it makes sense to present it in an unconventional and ungrammatical manner.

Indeed, with regard to the number and comprehensibility of fragments in *Ulysses,* commentators have pointed out that "the degree of fragmentation in such sentences corresponds to the intensity of [this character's] emotions and . . . excitement" (Runtić & Varga, 2013, p. 4). McCarthy, in a similar vein, is said to use sentence fragments to "relay thoughts to the readers in the same manner characters would think them . . . to close the gap between the reader and the protagonist" (Furey, 2011, p. 2). So we can draw an interesting correlation between the desired rhetorical effects of using sentence fragments in both of these novels, even if they do not follow the same grammatical rules. Both writers seem to implement sentence fragments to convey the thought process and mental makeup of characters.

Conclusion

The simplistic assertion that sentence fragments are incorrect and should be avoided was never true: a simple glance at accomplished writing in a myriad of contexts debunks this. But not all sentence fragments are created equal. There are indeed rules of using sentence fragments that we should uphold if we want to maintain clarity in our writing—yet even these rules can clearly be broken if a writer so desires and if the situation calls for it. In *No Country,* we find an example of a writer adhering to these rules, whereas in *Ulysses,* we find a writer eschewing these rules entirely. Interestingly, in the passages examined, both writers employ

sentence fragments to achieve a similar literary effect, show-
ing that fragments can be a valuable tool in the arsenal of
prudent writers.

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