Getting started at uni
Sentence structure

L3: Language, Literacies and Learning
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Is this sentence okay? Why/why not?

Risk to health consumption with content sugar high.

The subject of the sentence is not clear. The verb is missing. The object is not clear. Sentence is not structured clearly to convey meaning.

Possible grammatically correct sentence:
High levels of sugar consumption can lead to health risks.

Basic sentence structure:
Subject (main topic of the sentence) + Verb (the action word linked to the subject) + Object (extra detail).
Which of these is a complex sentence?

a) In today’s professional context, written communication needs to be clear and precise so as to be effective. ✅

b) Communication is important.

c) Communication is important because it leads to good relationships.

What makes it ‘complex’?

It is much more descriptive than a simple sentence. There is more detail provided about the main subject (i.e. ‘communication’).

In today’s professional context, written communication needs to be clear and precise so as to be effective.
Which of these reads better? Why?

A study was conducted on childhood development indicating that social behaviour can be influenced by the learning environment (Smith 2012).

A study was conducted by Smith (2012). The study was about childhood development. The findings of the study showed findings about social behaviour in children. Social behaviour in children can be influenced by the learning environment.

Use complex sentences in your academic writing:
• to express more by adding important detail about the main idea in a sentence;
• to avoid repetition and/or the use of unnecessary words;
• to express your ideas clearly and concisely.
Basic grammar rules to remember

• Every sentence should have a subject and a verb
• A complex sentence also includes extra detail to describe the subject and the context

In today’s professional context, written communication needs to be clear and precise so as to be effective.

What is the subject of the sentence? communication
Where and when? In today’s professional context
What type of communication? written
What does it need to be? clear and precise
Why? to be effective
Common errors to avoid

1. **Fragments** which do not contain a subject or verb
   Example: “In learning and development.”

2. **Run-ons** when one main clause runs into another
   Example: “The impact of media on behaviour can vary a number of studies indicate this quite clearly.”

3. **Unparallel structures** when similar structures have not been used to convey similar ideas in a sentence:
   - in a list or series
   - after a coordinating conjunction
   - tense agreement

   Example: “Quiet environments promote higher levels of concentration; however other distractions, such as the Internet, had to be avoided.”

   **Context is not clear**
   Who? What? How?

   **Where does one idea end and the next begin?**

   **Different verb tenses**

   **Academic writing is formal, discipline-specific but uses complex vocabulary.**

   The linking word ‘but’ means ‘in contrast’ not ‘in addition’.

University of South Australia
How do these two sentences differ?

Sentence 1
At first people liked reality TV shows and so lots of different programs were made but then viewers lost interest because there were too many of them.

Sentence 2
The initial popularity of reality television programs led to overproduction and in turn, audience disinterest.

Sentence 2 is more academic because:
- it is concise, formal and distant from people ‘doing things’;
- it has less verbs (action words);
- The focus is on a concept/idea.

This is called ‘nominalisation’
What does nominalisation mean?

- expressing ideas as concepts rather than actions by people
- minimising the number of verbs (action words) used
- changing verbs into nouns (things) or adjectives (descriptions) where possible

“I am concerned that people are misusing firearms and there are some accidents that kill people.”

Fatalities caused by firearm misuse is of great concern.

“The way people explain geography changes over time because things in society change.”

Explanations of gradual geographic variation often relate to social change.
Using **active, passive and nominalised** sentences

- **Active voice**: Use ‘active voice’ if the subject (the doer) is important:

  Smith (2012) *collected* data on childhood behaviour *as part of the research*.

- **Passive voice**: Use ‘passive voice’ if the act (not the doer) is important:

  Data on childhood behaviour *was collected* *as part of the research* (Smith 2012).

- **Nominalisation**: Use ‘nominalisation’ if the concept/idea (the doer and act as a whole) is important:

  The research method on childhood behaviour *involved* data collection (Smith 2012).
• Which type of sentences (active, passive or nominalised) are appropriate in my academic writing?

It depends on:
• what you wish to express; and
• what is more common in your discipline.

• How do I know what is common in my discipline?

Analyse readings in your courses to identify what style is more common. Identify your lecturer’s expectations.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active</th>
<th>Passive</th>
<th>Nominalisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning advisers teach students how to write academically in workshops throughout the year.</td>
<td>Students are taught how to write essays (by learning advisers) in workshops throughout the year.</td>
<td>Throughout the year, the teaching of academic writing skills for students....</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students can learn about referencing and plagiarism online and during face-to-face workshops.</td>
<td>Referencing and plagiarism can be learned (by students) both online and during face-to-face workshops.</td>
<td>Student learning about referencing and plagiarism...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturers and students at UniSA use software to identify plagiarism in assignments.</td>
<td>Software is used (by lecturers and students) at UniSA to identify plagiarism in assignments.</td>
<td>The use of software for plagiarism identification at UniSA....</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Further resources: [www.unisa.edu.au/L3](http://www.unisa.edu.au/L3)