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Things That Clarify: I

A sentence may be defined as a *sequence of words capable of standing alone to make an assertion, ask a question or give a command*. So let's start by considering how sentences begin and end.

Full stops

Full stop (.): *the punctuation mark used at the end of a sentence that is neither a question nor an exclamation; also used after some abbreviations.*

A *full stop* is also called a *point* or *full point*; in North America it is a *period*. All these terms mean the same thing. I use *full stop* because it's what I learned at school, not because it is

better or worse than any of the others.

As the definition above explains, a full stop comes at the end of a sentence. This can be a simple, one-clause sentence:

I went to bed early.

He handed in his notice.

They should be here soon.

Or it can be more complex:

I went to bed early: I had had several late nights in a row and there was nothing on television.

He handed in his notice after his boss had yelled at him in front of the entire office - he wasn't going to put up with that sort of thing.

They should be here soon, assuming that they left on time and they don't get caught up in traffic.

As in these longer examples, there may be other pieces of punctuation along the way but, unless the sentence requires a question mark or an exclamation mark, what comes at the end is a full stop, and it is followed by a capital letter, marking the beginning of the next sentence.

Straightforward enough at first glance. But on closer examination, not as straightforward as all that.

Because if you look at the previous paragraph, you'll see that the full stops come at the end not of complete

sentences but of what are called *sentence fragments* - bits of sentences, lacking a finite verb, that we can make sense of because of what has gone before. *Straightforward enough at first glance* doesn't have the vestige of a verb in it; nor does *But on closer examination, not as straightforward as all that*. If you read them in isolation they wouldn't tell you much. But in context they do. In your mind you can expand them to mean *that definition* seems [finite verb] *straightforward enough at first glance*. *But on closer examination, it is* [finite verb] *not as straightforward as all that*.

Another example: *Breakfast was magnificent. Eggs any style. Bacon from the local farm. Mushrooms from the local fields. And, most importantly, an apparently infinite quantity of tea.*

Breakfast was magnificent is a sentence, *was* being the finite verb. But all the rest are fragments, with the words *there were* or *there was* understood. But they still begin with a capital letter, have a full stop at the end and are followed by another capital.

See also the use of full stops in abbreviations and contractions, page 152.



Capital letters

Capital: *the large letter used at the beginning of a sentence or to denote a proper name; also often used in abbreviations and acronyms.*