

Mark Twain

What Mark Twain Did Not Say but Might Have Said If He Had Written This Book

How can you tell a sentence from a mud turtle? If you have to think, it's a mud turtle. A sentence is something other than a mud turtle, though they both have heads and tails. More than mud turtles, sentences are shined up, spiffy, with right words in a proper row. The parts of a sentence are hitched together in working order, fitted, not just lying around in loose heaps like rusty junkyard parts. A good sentence has no bad word. Bad sentences are worse than mud turtles.

A sentence's idea has finished, which is always a relief. A sentence has made it to its end. Even a hang-dog politician can tell that. Whatever it was that the sentence started to say, it said it. If you're listening and waiting and humming and puffing and yawning and looking at your watch, then it's not a sentence, and you didn't need a watch anyway. The sentence would have finished and walked away. Real sentences are done, not mostly done. When you hear a real sentence finished, you get an itch in your chin and a secret twitch on your lip, and you clamor, "Sez you," or "You don't say," or "What's it to ya?" You might not say much, but you sure say something. Maybe you say, "Well, that's *your* version," and roll your eyes.

Sometimes someone will raise an eyebrow and sniff, "Well, I beg to differ," but don't do that. We're all tired of that.

If you want to make some good sentences that won't make anyone mad, you have to decide what kind. There are different kinds. It's not like a straw hat, where one size fits all. The two main kinds of sentence are the action kind and the linking kind, and these are the two main kinds of thoughts that we have. People have these kinds of thoughts on the railroad, and they have them in the fields, and they have them when they build wagons out of new lumber. That guy in the barbershop has a lot of action sentences, though he's making most of 'em up. In a big confusion, they have a lot of action sentences, but when they slow down for a minute, they might think of linking sentences.

First, let's talk about action sentences. Action sentences show actions. In an action sentence somebody or something is doing something, usually to something. I can't tell you what the action is; it could be anything, like "Fido caught the cat." And it then depends on the cat, what happens next. Most of the time, Fido will be surprised to learn that catching a cat is not what it's cracked up to be.

Another action sentence could be "Henry dropped the doleful chicken." Henry would be disappointed, and the chicken would be disgusted. In an action sentence, you see, the subject acts. The chickens sneezed. Aunt Annie burned the gravy.

Linking verb sentences are different. Nobody does anything. Instead, linking sentences say one thing is another thing, but in different words, like "Arthur is a blue-tick hound dog." But why anyone would name a dog as noble as a blue-tick hound dog *Arthur* is beyond me. I'll try a different sentence: "Aunt Polly was a mighty foe of stinky feet." See? *Aunt Polly* and *foe* are the same thing. It's like what they call in school an equation. $Polly = foe$. The words for this, if you must know but don't want to ask, are *subject* and *subject complement*. The linking verb *was* makes an equation between the subject *Aunt Polly* and the subject complement *foe*. To hear Aunt Polly tell it, you'd think every boy was the horrid possessor of stinky feet and that boys generally were a bad sort.

There is a third kind of sentence, a being sentence, built on a being verb, like "Once there was a chicken." It means a chicken existed. We don't see being sentences on every corner. Chickens do exist, and they make more noise than mud turtles, but we put up with it because mud turtles don't lay eggs. Oh, wait, yes they do.

So when you look for a sentence, just remember, they are different from mud turtles, quieter than chickens (usually), and as right as Aunt Polly.