Word for Word

Comprise, compose, consist of

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Comprise, compose, and consist of all describe relationships between a whole and its component parts, but the terms are frequently confused with one another. In particular, many writers treat comprise as if it were a synonym for compose, but in fact the words describe these relationships in opposite ways.

Comprise means "to be made up of" or "to include." A whole comprises its parts. Thus, the phrase "comprised of" does not make sense and should not be used.¹ ²

Compose means "to form the substance of" or "to form by putting together."³ Parts compose a whole, and a whole is composed of its parts. (Compose also means "to create by mental or artistic labor,"³ as when a musician composes a song.)

Consist of, the least-often misused of the group, is a synonym for comprise--it means "to be made up of."³ A whole consists of its parts.

Examples:
The central nervous system comprises the brain and spinal cord.
The brain and spinal cord compose the central nervous system.
The central nervous system is composed of the brain and spinal cord.
The central nervous system consists of the brain and spinal cord.
References


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