

Word for Word

Comprise, Compose, Consist Of

Periodically, we will republish earlier entries that may be especially useful to our readers. This particular entry was originally published on June 20, 2012.

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

¹*AMA Manual of Style*, 10th ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 2007.

²*The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press; 2003.

³*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster; 2003.