Using Conjunctions in Sentences

by Sophia

WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers how to recognize dependent and independent clauses, and differentiate between clauses and phrases. The specific areas of focus include:

1. Phrases
2. Clauses
   - 2a. Independent
   - 2b. Dependent
3. Coordinating Conjunctions and Compound Sentences
4. Subordinating Conjunctions and Complex Sentences

1. Phrases

English sentences are composed of clauses and **phrases**. Understanding how these two units of information work and how to differentiate between them are really important because they're each essential elements of clear, comprehensible sentences.

A phrase is a small series of words that conveys some meaning, and phrases make up one small part of a sentence. Phrases don't have to have subjects and verbs, and they don't need to express a full thought.

Instead, a phrase is just a little chunk of meaning. The most common kind of phrase is a prepositional phrase.

EXAMPLE "In the morning," and "Without knowing why" are both prepositional phrases.

See how each of those phrases is just one little piece of information and sets up more information that's going to come in the rest of the sentence? Prepositional phrases are just one of the many types of phrases you can use.

Often, phrases act like parts of speech and can offer additional information to a complete sentence.

For as long as I can remember**, I've wanted a Great Dane, **one of the largest dog breeds.

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Notice how the **phrases** add in details that help explain more about the subject and the verb.

TERM TO KNOW

Phrase

A small series of words that conveys some meaning.

2. Clauses

Clauses, on the other hand, contain more information. A clause is a group of words that includes a subject and a verb.

There are two kinds of clauses:

- Independent
- Dependent

Taking a closer look at the differences between them is very important, as you need to be able to put these clauses together correctly to create clear sentences that your readers understand.

TERM TO KNOW

Clause

A group of words that includes a subject and a verb.

2a. Independent

An **independent clause** is a group of words that can stand alone as a sentence, although it does not have to.

You might remember that a sentence is a subject plus a verb plus a full thought; an independent clause is going to contain all of those elements and be able to stand on its own as a sentence if it wants to.

EXAMPLE "The dog sat in the doghouse" is an independent clause because it contains a subject, a verb, and a complete thought.

This kind of sentence is called a simple sentence. A simple sentence has one independent clause. A sentence with two independent clauses is called a compound sentence. We'll talk more about those later in this lesson.

TERM TO KNOW

Independent Clause

A group of words that can stand alone as a sentence, although it does not have to do so.

2b. Dependent

A **dependent clause** is a clause that cannot stand on its own as a sentence. It still has a subject and a verb, but it's missing that fully expressed thought that lets an independent clause stand alone.

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Therefore, a dependent clause is dependent upon connecting to an independent clause in order to become a full sentence.

EXAMPLE "While he was tired" is a dependent clause.

If you wrote this clause as a full sentence, would that be correct?

No, because although the dependent clause has a subject and a verb, it's missing a complete thought. You need to know what comes before "while" in order to understand this thought.

TERM TO KNOW

Dependent Clause

A clause that cannot stand on its own as a sentence.

3. Coordinating Conjunctions and Compound Sentences

Often, you'll see a dependent clause use something called a subordinating **conjunction**, such as "while," "after," "where," and "until," among others. Those kinds of words make a clause dependent. We'll discuss subordinating conjunctions in more detail later.

There are two ways to make a dependent clause, such as "while he was tired," into a complete sentence.

You could turn this into an independent clause and full sentence by completing the thought, like this:

The dog was tired.

Or you could use a **coordinating conjunction** to combine it with an independent clause, like this:

The dog sat in the doghouse, for he was tired.

See how now you have a full thought being expressed? A coordinating conjunction connects two independent clauses into a **compound sentence**.

As mentioned earlier, a compound sentence is a sentence that contains two or more independent clauses. Most of the time, a compound sentence will take two clauses that are somehow connected in their content and that are just about equally important to understanding the full thought.

Take a look at the following two separate but related sentences.

I want to pet that dog. That dog has fleas.

These are two good pieces of information, and each tells the reader something important about the situation.

The clauses can be separate, but if joined together, they provide a better understanding of what's going on.

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I want to pet that dog, but he has fleas.

Notice that these two clauses are now connected with a comma and then the word "but," which is a coordinating conjunction.

Using the acronym FANBOYS (For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So) is a good way to remember all of these coordinating conjunctions.

All of these words are common in English, even for connecting other words and phrases that aren't clauses, and each means something really different, changing the implication of a sentence. When you're using a coordinating conjunction to make a compound sentence, you'll need to select the correct one.

Take a closer look at each:

- *For* essentially means "because," which points to a cause-effect relationship between the two clauses that it connects.
- *And* tells us that whatever comes after it is going to add in more information that's relevant to the first clause.
- *Nor* is a negating word; it explains that the two clauses are not or introduces a clause that will be in the negative.
- *But* connects two clauses by pointing out that the second clause contradicts the first one in some way.
- *Or* offers options; it indicates that the reader can choose between the two ideas that the two clauses present.
- *Yet* works much like "but," but note that it means something very different when you see it outside of a compound sentence.
- *So* also describes cause and effect but specifically indicates that the second clause will describe something that is the result of whatever the first clause says.

In the following sentences, notice that the coordinating conjunction changes when you want the meaning of the whole sentence to change. In each sentence, there is a clause, then a comma and a coordinating conjunction, and then the next clause.
I like to pet dogs, and I also like to pet cats.
I like to pet dogs, but I do not like to pet cats.
I don't like to pet dogs, nor do I like to pet cats.
I don't like to pet dogs, yet I like to pet cats.

In a compound sentence, the comma always comes before the coordinating conjunction. This doesn't mean that a coordinating conjunction should always be preceded by a comma, though.

Sometimes, a coordinating conjunction might be used to connect two words as opposed to connecting two independent clauses; therefore, this would not create a compound sentence.

EXAMPLE "I could pet a dog or cat" is an example of a coordinating conjunction connecting two words.

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TRY IT

Consider the following two groups of sentences, and decide if they make sense.

Group A
All of the students wanted to pet the dog, yet the dog was happy to oblige.
*All of the students wanted to pet the dog, **and** the dog was happy to oblige.*

In the first sentence, the first clause indicates that everyone wanted to pet the dog, and the second clause indicates that the dog is happy about that situation. But when the two clauses are connected, the coordinating conjunction "yet" implies that the second clause negates, complicates, or even contradicts the first, which would mean that the students are not going to be able to pet the dog. The second sentence clears this up.

Group B
The students gathered around, and they could pet the dog.
*The students gathered around, **so** they could pet the dog.*

In the first sentence, the first clause has the students gathering together, and the second clause has them able to pet the dog. The coordinating conjunction "and" makes sense, but does it make *a lot* of sense? Is the relationship between the first and the second clause really clear? The second sentence clarifies that gathering around is meant to facilitate petting, and these two clauses are more effectively connected; the whole idea is much clearer.

TERMS TO KNOW

Conjunction
A word or phrase that connects parts of a sentence.

Coordinating Conjunction
A conjunction that connects two independent clauses in a compound sentence.

Compound Sentence
A sentence that contains two or more independent clauses.

4. Subordinating Conjunctions and Complex Sentences

A sentence that is composed of independent and dependent clauses is going to work a little differently than this. These kinds of sentences are called complex sentences, which is where one of the clauses is more important than the other.

Take a look at the sentence below.

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I will buy presents for my friends because the holidays are soon.

This sentence starts with an independent clause with “I” as the subject and “will buy” as the verb. Then there is a dependent clause with its own subject and its own verb. The two clauses are connected with the **subordinating conjunction** “because.”

A subordinating conjunction is a word or phrase that connects an independent and dependent clause. Remember, conjunctions are words or phrases that connect parts of a sentence. You’ve seen coordinating conjunctions, and now you have subordinating conjunctions.

Subordinating conjunctions are used in complex sentences. They indicate that the clause they precede is going to add in the necessary information to complete whatever thought the other clause has started. Some common subordinating conjunctions are “after,” “although,” “when,” “while,” and “until.”

Now consider the following sentence.

Since I brought my presents, I am ready for the holidays.

In this sentence, the subordinating conjunction is the first word, and thus the dependent clause comes first. That’s something you’ll see a lot.

Also note that when the dependent clause is first, it’s always followed by a comma before the independent clause. When the independent clause is first, there will not be a comma between clauses.

TERM TO KNOW

Subordinating Conjunction

Words and phrases that connect an independent clause to a dependent clause.

SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned about **phrases**, **independent clauses**, and **dependent clauses**, and how each comes together as part of a sentence, sometimes with prepositional phrases.

You also learned about the kinds of conjunctions you might use to connect clauses: **coordinating conjunctions connect compound sentences**, and **subordinating conjunctions connect complex sentences**.

Now that you’ve played around with these different conjunctions in both kinds of sentences, you can expand your writing beyond simple sentences.

Good luck!

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TERMS TO KNOW

Compound Sentence

A sentence that contains two or more independent clauses.

Conjunction

A word or phrase that connects parts of a sentence.

Coordinating Conjunction

A conjunction that connects two independent clauses in a compound sentence.

Subordinating Conjunction

Words and phrases that connect an independent clause to a dependent clause.

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