

## Writing Clear Sentences

To compose well-structured, properly punctuated sentences, writers should recognize and understand the key building blocks of sentences: clauses. Clauses can be independent or dependent. This handout examines independent clauses: the elements they're composed of—subjects and verbs—and their use to create dynamic and interesting sentences.

### Subjects

All clauses have a subject—the person, thing, concept, or idea that is doing or being something. Subjects are always nouns, pronouns, or noun phrases. Some examples include:

- Nouns: researchers, Sarah, roads
- Pronouns: she, it, they
- Noun phrases: the researchers, Sarah and her sister, the narrow British country roads and countless side streets

### Verbs

Accompanying the subject is a verb—the word or words that bring life to a clause. These can convey:

- Actions: run, eat, dance
- Sentiments: love, fear, hate
- Thought processes: ponder, realize, know
- Possession: own, have
- States of existence: be, seem, appear

Just like subjects, verbs can be made up of multiple actions or states of being or other words describing the actions or states of being. These collections of words are called verb phrases and include the verb + any direct or indirect objects that follow the verb (nouns and noun phrases not acting as subjects):

- The researchers have tested for alkaline in the water.
- She intensely and passionately loved her family.
- The narrow British country roads and countless side streets disoriented and confused the American driver.

### Sentence Structure: SVO

In English, most sentences are constructed in the order of SVO: subject, verb, object. However, because there are so many other elements that add meaning to sentences—prepositional phrases, adjectivals, restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses, etc.—writers sometimes alter the order of the elements that make up a sentence. It is usually beneficial to readers when writers keep their subject and verb close together; this maximizes clarity and makes it easier for lay readers to follow. It also helps readers remember who or what the sentence is about.

- Unclear: **DNA**, found in body fluids (blood, saliva, urine, and semen), soft tissues, bone, teeth, nails, hair roots (nuclear DNA), and hair shafts (mitochondrial DNA), **contains** genetic code.
- Clear: **DNA contains** genetic code and is found in body fluids (blood, saliva, urine, and semen), soft tissues, bone, teeth, nails, hair roots (nuclear DNA), and hair shafts (mitochondrial DNA).

### Composing with Independent Clauses

After recognizing an independent clause, writers can then use those clauses to construct sentences. Sentences made up of only independent clauses take two forms: simple and compound.

#### Simple Sentences

A simple sentence is composed of just one independent clause. The following sentences, which consist of only one noun phrase and one verb phrase, are examples of simple sentences:

The researchers have tested for alkaline in the water.

The student advisory board did not organize or plan any activities this year.

The narrow British country roads and countless side streets disoriented and confused the American driver.

Notice that in the second and third examples above, simple coordination is used to join like parts (verb + verb; noun + noun) within a single independent clause.

#### Compound Sentences

Writers can join independent clauses with two types of connectors—semicolons or commas (with coordinating conjunctions)—to create compound sentences. Writers can use each option to achieve various effects.

- Semicolons:  
The semicolon is a softer, less definite break between ideas. Writers opt for a semicolon to demonstrate that the ideas in each independent clause are closely related:

The test revealed malignant tumor cells; the attending physician scheduled the patient for surgery.

- Commas with Coordinating Conjunctions:  
If two independent clauses are closely related but writers want to specify that relationship, then connecting independent clauses with a comma and a coordinating conjunction might be the better choice. Each conjunction conveys a different meaning. For example:

The test revealed malignant tumor cells, **SO** the attending physician scheduled the patient for surgery.

#### Coordinating Conjunctions

#### **F A N B O Y S**

---

**For** - cause

**And** - balance/addition

**Nor** - choice/option/alternative

**But** - contrast/opposition

**Or** - contrast/alternative

**Yet** - contrast/concession

**So** - effect/result

This coordinating conjunction implies that the second independent clause is an effect or result of the first independent clause. But a different coordinating conjunction changes the meaning:

The test revealed malignant tumor cells, **and** the attending physician scheduled the patient for surgery.

Here, the coordinating conjunction implies that the second independent clause is additional to the first independent clause; the ideas in both are balanced. Either option is grammatically correct, but it's up to writers to choose which meaning is best.

### **Avoiding Common Errors: Fused Sentences**

One common problem writers face when joining multiple independent clauses is omitting or improperly using the connector, the result of which is called a fused (or, colloquially, a run-on) sentence.

- Example of a fused sentence with an omitted connector:  
The test revealed malignant tumor cells the attending physician scheduled the patient for surgery.
- Example of a fused sentence with an improperly used connector:  
The test revealed malignant tumor cells so the attending physician scheduled the patient for surgery.

Notice that even though a coordinating conjunction was used in the second example, there's no comma, which is required when using coordinating conjunctions to create compound sentences.

One last note: using a comma alone (with no coordinating conjunction) to connect independent clauses causes a different error known as a comma splice.

**Effect:** Along with rhythm, the placement of the dependent clause and the decision to use either a relative pronoun or a subordinating conjunction creates different meanings and effects.

- **Emphasize Action:** Using a relative pronoun as a signal word allows a writer to use one subject and attribute more actions, or verbs, to that subject. In the previous example,

The researchers, who tested for alkaline in the water, more accurately determined the sample's acid neutralization capabilities.

There is one subject ("researchers"/"who") but two verbs ("tested" and "determined"). The focus is on one subject with further emphasis on what that subject is doing or being.

- **Emphasize Relationships:** Using a subordinating conjunction, on the other hand, allows a writer to emphasize a particular relationship between the clauses:

Because the researchers tested for alkaline in the water, the experiment more accurately determined the sample's acid neutralization capabilities.

Here the focus is on the relationship the dependent clause has with the independent clause: Testing for alkaline is the reason ("because") the experiment can accurately determine acid neutralization capabilities.

**Punctuation:** The choice to use a subordinating conjunction vs. a relative pronoun and the placement of the dependent clause in the sentence all leads to different punctuation rules. For a complete explanation of how to use commas when composing with dependent clauses, see our "Understanding Commas" handout.

### **Avoiding Common Errors: Fragments**

A dependent clause that is not attached to an independent clause is a fragment, a partial sentence punctuated like a full sentence. The presence of a subordinating conjunction or relative pronoun is a signal that additional information (in the form of an independent clause) is needed.

#### Subordinating Conjunction Fragment

While our society has declared racism to be a thing of the past.

Although there is a subject, "society," and a verb, "has declared," the subordinating conjunction "while" signals that this is a dependent clause and cannot stand alone. To revise, a writer has two options:

1. Delete the subordinating conjunction:  
~~While~~ Our society has declared racism to be a thing of the past.
2. Connect to an **independent clause**:  
While our society has declared racism to be a thing of the past, **numerous racially charged incidences continue to erupt across the country.**

#### Relative Pronoun Fragment

Which resulted in unclear lab findings and a biased experiment.

In this case, the relative pronoun, "which," stands in for the subject and is paired with the verb "resulted." But because "which" isn't the full subject, this clause cannot stand alone. To revise, writers can either:

1. Substitute the relative pronoun with a subject:  
The technician's mistake resulted in unclear lab findings and a biased experiment.
2. Connect to an **independent clause**:  
**The technician's mistake**, which resulted in unclear lab findings and a biased experiment, **led to a second round of tests.**