Dependent Clauses

All clauses have a subject and a verb. But clauses come in two forms: independent and dependent. This handout examines dependent clauses: identifying and constructing them to add subordinate (often referred to as restrictive, non-restrictive, or relative) information to sentences.

Identifying Dependent Clauses

Unlike an independent clause, a dependent clause cannot stand alone as a complete sentence. To identify the difference between these two clauses, look for two types of signal words that often start a dependent clause: subordinating conjunctions and relative pronouns.

Subordinating Conjunctions: this type of word signals the addition of supplemental information that enhances, clarifies, or further describes the independent clause. Subordinating conjunctions are simply added to the beginning of an independent clause, transforming it into a dependent clause:
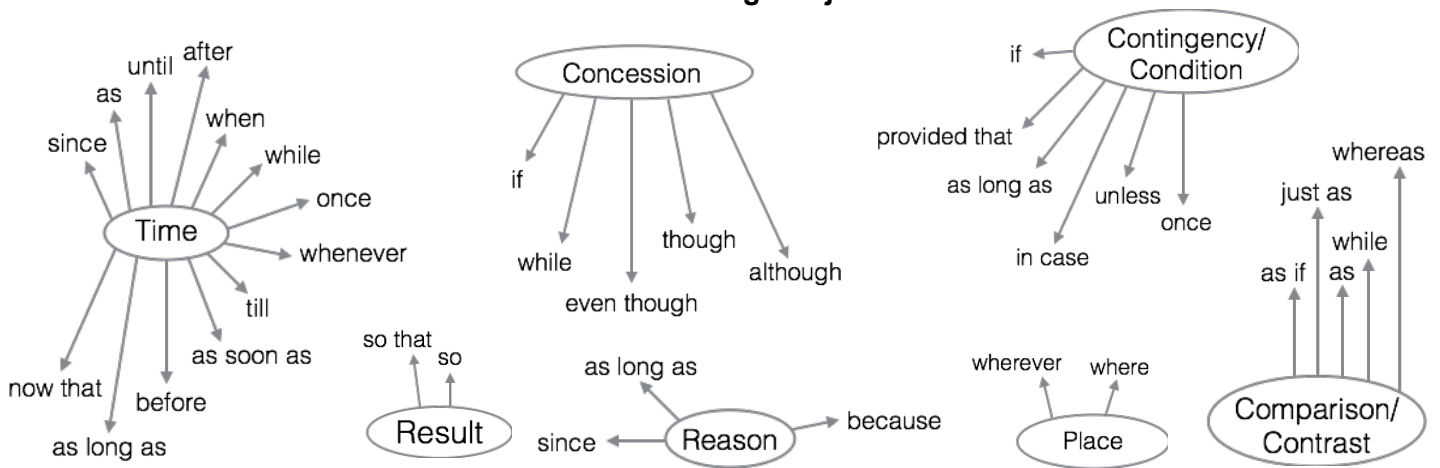
- Independent clause:
    The researchers tested for alkaline in the water.
- Dependent clause:
    Because the researchers tested for alkaline in the water

That dependent clause must be connected to an independent clause to form a complete sentence:

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

Notice that in the above example, the accuracy of the results is the main idea while the testing for alkaline frames or sets up that idea. In other words, the meaning conveyed in the dependent clause is subordinate to (lesser than) the independent clause. The graphic below shows how different subordinating conjunctions can indicate different relationships between dependent and independent clauses. Choose one that best fits your meaning.

Common Subordinating Conjunctions

Relative Pronouns: Unlike subordinating conjunctions that are added to independent clauses, relative pronouns replace an independent clause's subject, transforming it into a dependent clause:

- Independent clause:
  The researchers tested for alkaline in the water.
- Dependent clause:
  Who tested for alkaline in the water

The relative pronoun, "Who," stands in for noun, "The researchers," and the rest of the clause remains the same. The dependent clause then must be connected to an independent clause by placing it next to the person, thing, or idea it modifies:

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

Below are the relative pronouns:

that	which	who	whom	whose

Composing with Dependent Clauses

A dependent clause cannot stand alone in a sentence and either must be turned into or linked to an independent clause. For the latter option, there are three choices writers must consider: placement, effect, and punctuation.

Placement: When composing with dependent clauses, a writer can position them before, within, or after the independent clause. Consider the following examples:

- Before: **Because** it served as an under-the-radar form of communication, call-and-response singing was an important part of African-American slave culture.
- Within: Call-and-response singing, **which** was an important part of African-American slave culture, served as an under-the-radar form of communication.
- After: Call-and-response singing was an important part of African-American slave culture **because** it served as an under-the-radar form of communication.

Notice how the rhythm of the sentences varies with each placement of the dependent clause. Understanding how to manipulate this rhythm allows writers to control the pace and flow of information.

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**.