

Understanding Clauses and How to Connect Them to Avoid Fragments, Comma Splices, and Fused Sentences

A “Grammar Help Handout” by Abbie Potter Henry

Independent Clauses

An independent clause (IC) contains at least one subject and one verb and can stand by itself as a simple sentence. Here are examples of independent clauses. Because these sentences only have one independent clause and no dependent clauses, they are called **Simple Sentences**.

I eat spaghetti.
She eats pizza.

I slept.
I was sleepy.

I can eat.
I can sleep.

I sleep late.
John sleeps later.
Jessica sleeps latest of all.

Independent clauses can have more than one subject and more than one verb but will only express one idea.

John and Sarah love my dog. (two subjects)
My dog adores and jumps on John and Sarah. (two verbs)

A sentence with a single independent clause can also have a lot of phrases that modify parts of the independent clause.

For example: After dinner, **I will study** for the math test coming up right before Spring Break. (The independent clause is in **bold** font.)

A sentence is a group of words containing at least one independent clause. If you put a period at the end of a group of words and that group of words does not contain at least one independent clause, you have written a Sentence Fragment!

Just like a fragment of seashell or a fragment of glass, a sentence fragment is only a piece of a sentence, and just like a fragment of shell or glass will cut your foot if you step on it, a sentence fragment will cut your grade down if you write it in an essay, so you should avoid sentence fragments! **Make sure you have written an independent clause before you add that period.**

Many sentences have two or more independent clauses, but if the writer does not correctly connect these clauses, he or she will create a **Comma Splice or Fused (Run on) sentence**. These errors will also cause a lower grade on a piece of writing.

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Connecting Independent Clauses

There are only three (3) ways to correctly connect two or more independent clauses in a single sentence:

- 1. Comma and a Coordinating Conjunction**
- 2. Semicolon**
- 3. Semicolon, Conjunctive Adverb, and Comma**

1. A comma plus one of the coordinating conjunctions (FANBOYS) will successfully connect two independent clauses and will create a relationship between the clauses that they connect.

The Coordinating Conjunctions, aka, F A N B O Y S are:

For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So

Remember: The comma comes first, and the conjunction comes next.* The previous sentence is an example of this rule. Here are other examples taken from the simple sentences on the previous page. I have added in *italics* the relationship that each word creates.

I eat spaghetti, **but** she eats pizza, **and** she hates my dog. *Contrast and Addition*

I eat spaghetti, **yet** she eats pizza. *Contrast*

I was sleepy, **so** I slept. *Cause/ Effect*

I slept, **for** I was sleepy. *Effect/cause*

I can eat, **or** I can sleep. *Alternative*

I love my dog, and my dog loves me. *Addition*

I can neither eat, **nor** can I sleep. *Negative alternative (Notice that you must switch some words around in your second independent clause when using the negative “nor.”*

* Coordinating conjunctions can also connect smaller groups of words such as nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, or phrases. When connecting two of these smaller parts, you do not need a comma, so the sentence “Jane **and** Bob went to the store” does not require a comma before “and” because it is only connecting two subjects not two independent clauses; likewise, the sentence “I like to walk in the park **and** around the lake” does not require a comma because “and” is connecting two prepositional phrases not two independent clauses.

2. A simple semicolon (;) can connect two independent clauses.

Examples:

I eat spaghetti; she eats pizza.

I was sleepy; I slept.

I can eat; I can sleep.

I love my dog; she hates my dog.

Please notice that, unlike coordinating conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs (transitional words), the semicolon does not create any kind of relationship between the two independent clauses; it simply connects the two and makes them part of a single sentence.

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3. A semi colon, conjunctive adverb (transitional word/phrase), and a comma can connect two independent clauses. You will find a list of conjunctive adverbs at the bottom of this page.

Examples:

I eat spaghetti; **however**, she eats pizza.

I was sleepy; **therefore**, I slept.

I can eat; **then**, I can sleep.

I love my dog; **on the other hand**, she hates my dog.

Although conjunctive adverbs can show many more types and subtleties of relationships than do the **FANBOYS**, the following create similar relationships. (You will find a list of common conjunctive adverbs at the end of this handout.)

F for

A and = also, furthermore, moreover, in addition.

N nor

B but = however, nonetheless, nevertheless.

O or = on the other hand.

Y yet = however, nonetheless, nevertheless.

S so = consequently, therefore, thus, as a result.

Conjunctive adverbs can also show many other relationships, including:

Time: finally, meanwhile, next, then, still

Example/illustration: for example, for instance, namely

Comparison: similarly, likewise

Note that even in the various categories, subtleties of degree exist, and these words provide lots and lots of opportunity for you to develop and show relationship throughout your writing. Never assume your reader knows anything about the relationship you are trying to express.

Common Conjunctive Adverbs (Transitional Words and Phrases)

Also	Furthermore	Moreover	Still
As a result	Hence	Nevertheless	Then
At the same time	However	Next	Thereafter
Besides	In addition	Nonetheless	Therefore
Certainly	Incidentally	Now	Thus
Consequently	Indeed	On the other hand	Undoubtedly
Finally	Instead	Otherwise	
For example	Likewise	Similarly	
	Meanwhile		

Coordinating Conjunctions (FANBOYS): For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So

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Review of Independent Clauses

Independent Clause: An Independent Clause is a group of words containing at least one subject and one verb and which is not subordinated by a subordinating conjunction or a relative pronoun. (See page two for a list of these words.) Sentences with only one independent clause and no dependent clauses are called **simple sentences**.

Example: **I eat dinner** with my mother and her friend, John.

We eat a very healthy dinner made by my mother each night.

Two or more independent clauses can be connected together in a single sentence. Sentences that contain two or more independent clauses and no dependent clauses are called **compound sentences**.

Example: **I eat dinner** with my mother and her friend, John; moreover, **we always eat a very healthy dinner**

I eat dinner with my mother and her friend, John, and **we always eat a very healthy dinner**

Sentence: A sentence is a group of words that contains at least one independent clause.

Dependent Clauses

Joke: If Santa and Mrs. Claus had children, what would they be called?

Answer: Dependent Clauses

Dependent Clause: A Dependent Clause is a group of words that contains at least one subject and one verb and which is subordinated by either a subordinating conjunction or a relative pronoun. Another name for a **dependent clause** is **subordinate clause**. Dependent/Subordinate clauses are so named because they cannot survive as a sentence on their own; they must be connected to an independent clause. If you do not connect a dependent clause to an independent clause, you will create a sentence Fragment, which is a very serious grammatical error.

Example: **After** I eat dinner

Which is very healthy

Who is my mother’s friend

That my mother makes each night

Even though each of the groups of words above contains at least one subject and one verb, each is a fragment not a sentence because a sentence must contain at least one independent clause. We can turn the fragments above into sentences by attaching them to an independent clause.

Example: After I eat dinner, I take a nap

Every night my mother makes a dinner, which is very healthy.

We eat dinner with John, who is my mother’s friend.

The three of us enjoy the dinner that my mother makes each night.

Sentences that contain independent and dependent clauses are called **Complex Sentences**.

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Dependent Clauses

Dependent clauses are created by two types of words, Subordinating Conjunctions and Relative Pronouns.

Common Subordinating Conjunctions

After	Even though	Unless
Although	In case	Until
As	If	When
As far as	In order that	Whenever
As if	In that	Whether
As soon as	Now that	Where
As though	Once	Wherever
Before	Provided that	While
Because	Since	
Even if	Though	

Note: It is very important to recognize the difference between subordinating conjunctions, conjunctive adverbs, and coordinating conjunctions because each requires very different punctuation. Some students have found it helpful to create flashcards for these words and color coding them to that each category is a different color.

Relative Pronouns

Who	Which	Whoever	Whose
Whom	That	Whomever	

Punctuating complex sentences

Dependent Clauses that begin with a subordinating conjunction

Comma Rule: If your sentence begins with a dependent clause, use a comma to introduce your independent clause. The previous sentence is an example of this rule. If your sentence begins with an independent clause, you do not need a comma to introduce your dependent clause because the subordinating conjunction does the introduction. (The dependent clause is in bold font)

Example: **After I eat**, I sleep.
I sleep **after I eat**.

Dependent Clauses that begin with a relative pronoun

Comma Rule: If the dependent clause contains information that identifies the noun and pronoun that comes before it, do not use commas to separate it from that word. If, however, the information in the dependent clause simply gives additional information, it can be separated from the rest of the sentence with commas. (The dependent clause is in bold font)

Example: My best friend, **who is a student at UCF**, is very sweet.
Students **who go to UCF** get a good education.