

1 Grammar

1.1 Some Definitions

Predicate: The verb like part of a clause. *I listened to him talk*

1.2 Clauses

A group of words with both subject and predicate. Divided into a few categories:

Independent Clause: A group of words that could stand on its own as a sentence. It is a complete thought. *I am learning to write.*

Dependent Clause: A group of words that is not a complete thought. If this comes before the independent clause it is usually separated with a comma. *Because I write poorly at the moment, I am writing this document.*

Relative Clause: A clause usually introduced by the relative pronouns who, whom, which or whose, by the subordinator that and by the relative adverbs where, why and when

Restrictive (or defining, integrated relative) clause: A clause that functions as an adjective to identify the word it modifies. Note that this doesn't just provide extra information. It is essential to understanding. It is not offset by commas. *I wrote this paper with the professor who is my advisor I fed the dog that I found outside*

Nonrestrictive (or non-defining, non-integrated relative) clause: This is also an adjectival clause, though it contains non-essential information. It is offset by commas. *Bob, who I met last week, is a nice guy*

1.3 Phrases

A group of words that doesn't have both subject and object. Often in one of these forms:

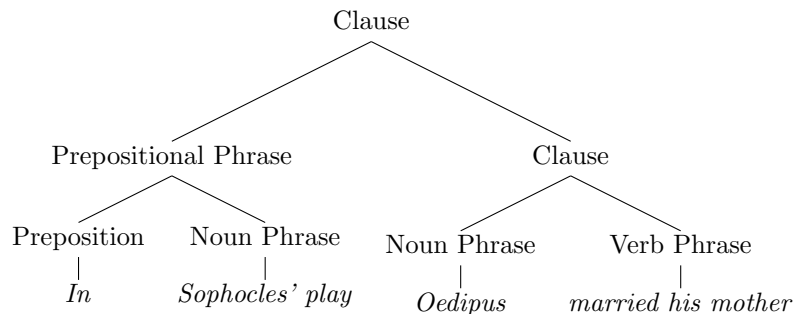
Prepositional Phrase: *After meeting with him*

1.4 Syntax

Syntax is the set of rules that govern the structure of sentences. Or, knowledge of syntax is what allows us to translate our amorphous ideas into a tree of phrases and then into a string of words. Consider.

In Sophocles' play, Oedipus marries his mother

This breaks down into,



We could have broken this down into more detail (*married his mother* is very followed by a noun phrase), but I think this gives the main idea.

2 Punctuation

2.1 Comma

Two main purposes: First, to separate parenthetical comments about a thing (action, event, state), from the words necessary to pin down the thing itself. Second, to signal a break in pronunciation (sometimes called a prosodic break).

To illustrate the first, compare: *Sticklers who don't understand the conventions of punctuation shouldn't criticize errors by others. Sticklers, who don't understand the conventions of punctuation, shouldn't criticize errors by others.*

In the first of these we single out a subset of sticklers with a restrictive clauses. The second makes a parenthetical jibe at sticklers and so this is separated.

Consider also, *I visited my friend Bob I visited my friend, Bob*

In the first, it is important that I visited Bob. In the second, it is only significant that I visited a friend (and by the way, the friend's name is Bob).

After an introductory phrase. *After meeting with him, I went to lunch*

Then why are commas so complicated? They serve two purposes: they both signal a syntactic break (separating a phrase or clause) and a prosodic break, a slight pause in pronunciation. Often these line up, but sometimes they don't and that causes problems. Consider, *When the supplementary phrase is short, a speaker naturally skates right over it to the next phrase in the sentence, and it is then unclear whether the punctuation should reflect the syntax or the sound.* While a comma that demarcates a syntactic break can be omitted when the pronunciation flows through it, the converse is not allowed: a comma may not separate the elements of an integrated phrase.

2.2 Semicolon

2.3 Colon

3 Sentence level structures

There are many ways to say the same thing. *Bob flew the helicopter over the river*, *The helicopter was flown by Bob over the river* These are two common “voices”, active and passive. There are more.

3.1 Active vs Passive

In the active voice, sentences are ordered subject-verb-object. *I ate the pizza*. In the passive voice, the order becomes object-to be-past participle-subject. *The pizza was eaten by me*. The subject no longer acts.

In what cases might we want to use the passive?

- We don’t know (or care about) the subject. In the passive voice, the “by-phrase” can be omitted and so we can write *The man was pulled from the burning house* rather than *The fireman pulled the man...*
- The object connects more readily with the previous sentence. Compare *I brought my lunch to work*. *It was made last night by my favourite indian restaurant*. with *I brought my lunch to work*. *My favourite indian restaurant made it last night*. After the first sentence, “my lunch” is on our minds. If there is anything new to be said about the food, we should begin by mentioning it. In the second example, the second sentence begins with the digression “My favourite indian restaurant”, and only later connects it back the sentence before. This adds cognitive load.

3.2 Topic, then comment. Given, then new

People learn by integrating new information into their existing web of knowledge. If a fact is presented without any background or link to what came before, the reader will have to hold this fact in memory while waiting for context. Don’t force them to do this! First present the context. Often the only way to do this is to use the passive voice (as English requires subject - verb ordering).

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3.3 Light before Heavy

The US constitution says *among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*. Why does this sound so much better than *among these are the pursuit of happiness, liberty and life*?

The principle behind this is that the reader can best handle a heavier phrase at the end once they have already done the work to understand the overarching structure. Putting the heavy phrase first makes the understanding the structure harder.

He ran away from the cats, frogs, and long legged spiders He ran away from the long-legged spiders, cats, and frogs

4 Paragraph level structures

See Pinker [chapter 5 2014].

4.1 Don't bury the lede

In the same spirit as “Topic, then comment”, people find it much easier to understand where the argument is going if they know where the argument is going! See Bransford and K. Johnson [1972]. The short summary is that recall of a passage doubled when the readers were given a sentence long description of the topic at the start. Getting the topic at the end didn't help at all.

Don't worry that it appears unsubtle to you to declare openly at the start, “This section is about X”. Your audience, who have not read this before and haven't been thinking through the argument for the last year, will appreciate having this context when they read it. This is especially true because the argument is likely not exhaustively stepped through. There will be small gaps, and knowing where you are going will help the reader jump them.

4.2 Introducing characters

It is important to distinguish between new characters and the return of old characters. *Bob died in a helicopter crash and his relative ...* His refers back to Bob, but the sentence would sound very weird if we replaced it with “Bob's”. However, if other characters have appeared since we last talked about Bob, or it has been a while, it might not be obvious who the pronoun refers to.

Another way to identify characters is by using the definite article *the* and the indefinite article *a*. For example, *A helicopter pilot walks into a bar. The helicopter pilot rubs his now sore head.* The indefinite article shows that the character is new. The definite article refers back to the one we have already met.

4.3 Variation vs Consistency

In some cases, repetition sounds wrong. *Bob and Bob's relative ...* When it is clear you should use pronouns. This lets the reader know that this character is someone they have encountered before.

Sometimes a pronoun is not clear. Would replacing “The birds” with “They” be clear here? *The sparrows pecked at the seeds. The birds love my new bird-*

feeder In that case you can use a pseudo-pronoun: a more general form of the original noun that immediately calls to mind the first one.

These variations were for good reasons. Don't vary terminology capriciously as it can cost understanding or just sound silly itself. In particular, when connecting two things you should definitely not vary the terminology as the connection can become less clear. Compare,

4.4 Relating sentences

Resemblance, contiguity in time or place, cause and effect.

References

- J. Bransford and M. K. Johnson. Contextual prerequisites for understanding: Some investigations of comprehension and recall1. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 11:717–726, 12 1972. doi: 10.1016/S0022-5371(72)80006-9.
- S. Pinker. *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*. New York, NY: Penguin, 2014.