Introduction

A clause is the basic unit of grammar. Typically a main clause is made up of a subject (s) (a noun phrase) and a verb phrase (v). Sometimes the verb phrase is followed by other elements, e.g. objects (o), complements (c), adjuncts (ad). These other elements are sometimes essential to complete the meaning of the clause:

[S]Sarah [V]smiled.

[S]Jo [V] doesn't feel [C]well.

Not: ~~Jo doesn't feel~~. (Well is essential because it completes the meaning of feel.)

[S]They [V] haven't posted [O]all the invitations. (Post is a transitive verb which needs an object, all the invitations)

The underlined words are not essential to complete the clause:

[S]I [V]'ll call [O]you [AD] later.

[S]All the girls [V]laughed [AD] loudly.

When we give a command, we don't usually use a subject:

Be careful!

Jump!

When we do use the subject, it is to reinforce the instruction or to make clear exactly who the speaker is talking to:

You be careful.

Definition:

A clause is a group of words that contains a subject and a verb that have a relationship. This relationship is crucial; a clause conveys information

about what that subject is or is doing, rather than simply being a random grouping of words. Because a clause expresses an action or a state of being, a clause can often—but not always—function as an independent sentence.

A sentence can have just one clause or it can have multiple clauses. The only defining characteristic of a clause is that it must contain a related subject and verb. Clauses play a variety of roles in English and because of this, there are numerous ways to structure and combine them.

Although you use clauses in your speech and writing every day, it can be easy to overlook the intricacies of clauses in English. Read on to learn how clauses are classified, the roles clauses play in <u>sentences</u>, how to combine clauses to express your thoughts, and the difference between independent and dependent clauses.

Classifying clauses in English

When it comes to expressing a complete thought, a clause falls between a <u>phrase</u> and a sentence. In many cases, a clause can function as its own sentence. A phrase, in contrast, can't. Here's a quick look at the difference between a phrase and a clause:

- *Phrase: Meows so loudly*

- *Clause: That cat meows so loudly*

In this example, the clause can be an independent sentence. It can also be part of a complex sentence. For example:

- *That cat meows so loudly when she wants to eat.*

How do clauses in English work?

Clauses can perform three distinct functions: They can operate as adverbs, adjectives, or nouns.

Here's an example of a noun clause:

- *She completely understood **everything he said**.*

*In this example, **everything he said** is a dependent clause that acts as a noun because it communicates the specific "thing" that she, the subject of the sentence, understands. **Everything he said** can be replaced with **his explanation** and the sentence still makes perfect sense:*

- *She completely understood **his explanation**.*

To test whether a clause is a noun clause, try swapping it out for a noun. If your sentence still makes sense, you've got a noun clause. Here are two more examples of noun clauses illustrated through swapped-in nouns:

- *They remembered **what the keynote speaker covered**.*
  - *They remembered the **keynote speaker's presentation**.*
- *I don't know **how the company handles onboarding**.*
  - *I don't know **their onboarding process**.*

Just like a noun clause is a clause taking on a noun's role, an adverbial clause is a clause acting as an adverb. For example:

- *She fixed the sink **without facing difficulty**.*
  - *She fixed the sink **easily**.*
- *They spent four years **living outside the United States**.*

- They spent four years ***living abroad****.*

- *The pool was installed **after they built the deck***.*

  - *The pool was installed **later***.*

Based on the other two categories, we bet you can guess how an adjective clause works. In case you can't, here it is: An adjective clause acts as an adjective in its sentence. Here are a few examples with adjectives swapped in to illustrate them:

- ***My friend who rides a motorcycle** said it's a great weekend to ride.*

  - ***My motorcyclist friend** said it's a great weekend to ride.*

- *No matter what time of day we visit, we always run into **the dog that barks***.*

  - *No matter what time of day we visit, we always run into **the loud dog***.*

Types of clauses

Independent clauses

An independent clause is a clause that can stand on its own as a distinct sentence. Take a look at these examples:

- *I love eating cookies.*

- *My dog barks a lot.*

- *The kids ate lunch.*

- *His truck is green.*

*As you can see, independent clauses aren't long or complex sentences. They can certainly be part of complex sentences, but by definition, they are known as simple sentences. Other <u>types of sentences</u> include **complex sentences, compound sentences**, and **compound-complex sentences**. Each type of sentence is created by a unique combination of independent and dependent clauses. We'll get into the ways to combine clauses to create different kinds of sentences shortly.*

Dependent clauses

In contrast, a dependent clause is not a complete sentence. Dependent clauses are sometimes known as <u>subordinate clauses</u>. As their name implies, these clauses depend on independent clauses to clearly express ideas. Here are a few examples of dependent clauses:

- *When I grow up*
- *Although he sings well*
- *The mouse that was hiding*

To turn these dependent clauses into full sentences, you need to combine them with independent clauses:

- ***When I grow up**, I want to be a doctor.*
- ***Although he sings well**, he hates karaoke.*
- *I searched through the basement and found **the mouse that was hiding**.*

Take a look at these three sentences and see if you can pick out the differences between the first two and the last one.

In the first two examples, the dependent clause comes before the independent clause and the two clauses are separated by commas. Keep this in mind when you're writing: **Whenever the dependent clause comes first in a complex sentence, it's followed by a comma.**

How to combine clauses

When you want to write a sentence that's more than one independent clause, you need to combine clauses. **Every sentence you write includes at least one independent clause.** The other clauses in your sentence determine how you can combine them with your independent clause.

A sentence that includes **two or more** independent clauses is known as a compound sentence. In a compound sentence, the clauses are joined by a comma paired with a **coordinating conjunction**, a **semicolon**, or a **colon**. This kind of combination is known as **coordination**. Take a look at these examples of compound sentences:

- I love drinking soda, **but** I know it's bad for my teeth.

- Malik loved hosting dinner parties**;** her friends enjoyed her cooking.

- We danced until the band finished playing**:** they played until midnight.

When all of your clauses are independent clauses, you can combine them using a **coordinating conjunction**. In English, the coordinating conjunctions are:

- for

- and

- nor

- *but*

- *or*

- *yet*

- *so*

*If you need to combine a dependent clause with an independent clause, you need a **subordinating conjunction**. There are a lot more subordinating conjunctions than there are coordinating conjunctions, and they can be divided into categories according to their function.*

*A sentence that includes an independent clause and one or more dependent clauses is known as a **complex sentence**, and a sentence that includes two or more independent clauses and at least one dependent clause is known as a **compound-complex sentence**. In either of these kinds of sentences, the subordinating conjunction signifies the beginning of the dependent clause. Here are a few examples:*

- *The fun can begin **now that the clown is here**.*

- ***While we slept**, the plane reached its destination.*

- ***Before you leave**, remember to take a goodie bag!*

- *The pool is open daily **until the temperature drops**.*

As you can see in these examples, when the dependent clause comes first, it needs to be followed by a comma.

*Subordinating conjunctions aren't the only way to add a dependent clause to a sentence. Dependent clauses can also start with **relative pronouns** or **relative adverbs**.*

*Relative pronouns include **that, whose, whom, who,** and **which**. Take a look at how these dependent clauses that begin with relative pronouns work in sentences:*

- *The guy **who shouted all night** made it impossible to fall asleep.*

- *Pac's, **that restaurant with the arcade**, is the best restaurant in town.*

*Relative adverbs include **where, when, how,** and **why**. Here are a few relative adverb-led dependent clauses at work:*

- *The traffic jam is the reason **why we were late**.*

- *I have no idea **when my hose stopped working***

Main (independent) clauses and subordinate (dependent) clauses

Main (or independent) clauses can form sentences on their own. They aren't dependent on other clauses. They are always finite (they must contain a verb which shows tense).

Subordinate (or dependent) clauses cannot form sentences on their own. They are dependent on main clauses to form sentences. They can be finite or non-finite (the main clauses are in bold; the subordinate clauses are underlined):

Example:

***I didn't go to work** because I wasn't feeling very well.*

***He studied violin and mathematics** before taking a medical degree and doing postgraduate work in biophysics at Harvard.*

She had pretty hair and must have been nice-looking when she was young.

*If I tell him **will he be angry**?*

Clauses: coordinated

We can combine clauses of the same grammatical type to form sentences using coordinating conjunctions:

*[main clause]I'll take the train **and** [main clause]you can take the car.*

*I'll give you a call [subordinate clause]if I'm going to be late **or** [subordinate clause]if I'm not coming.*

*You can use the phone [non-finite clause]to receive calls **but** [non-finite clause]not to make them.*

We don't create coordinated clauses with clauses of a different grammatical type. For example we cannot coordinate a main clause and a subordinate clause:

*Ten minutes passed **and** no one had come.*

Not: ~~Ten minutes passed and if no-one had come~~.