



The Fast Track 6-Week Mini-Course

Week 1

The #1 rule for commas or how to avoid sentence fragments, comma splices, and run-on sentences

Have you heard of the book *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*? At first glance, most people don't realize it's a joke based on a panda's diet and a misplaced comma.

Maybe you've seen the cartoon that features an elderly woman stirring something on the stove and a few kids shouting "Come on! Let's eat grandmother!" Clearly, a comma would be useful after *eat* and before *grandmother*.

The main purpose of commas is to separate parts of sentences into meaningful chunks so they can be read and understood easily. Commas also help avoid misunderstandings.

But which parts of sentences should you separate? How can you tell them apart?

The #1 rule: Use a comma between two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction.

Uh-oh. What's an independent clause? A coordinating conjunction? Huh?

Hold on. Maybe you've heard of *independent clauses* and *coordinating conjunctions*, but maybe you haven't. It might even sound like gibberish to you.

With that in mind, let's review some definitions before we get into particulars. These will be used in later mini-lessons (and they make this lesson the longest), so be sure to take a close look and save this lesson for review.

Objectives:

- Be able to spot different kinds of *subjects* and *main verbs (predicates)* easily
- Get familiar with *coordinating conjunctions* and understand their purpose
- Identify *independent clauses*
- Use commas correctly with two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction
- Avoid errors like *run-on sentences*, *fragments*, and *comma splices*

Subjects and verbs

Subjects

A subject is the main actor in a sentence. It is *doing* a verb or *being* something.

It's usually a *noun* (a person, place, thing, or idea) or a *pronoun* (I, you, he, she, it, we, you, they). It can also be a word that acts as a noun, like a *gerund* (a verb that ends in -ing like *running*, *singing*, or *eating*).

A subject can be *simple* (one subject) or *compound* (more than one subject).

Simple subject: The dog played with the toy.

Dog is the subject because it is the main actor.

Plural simple subject: The dogs played with the toy.

Dogs is the subject because it represents the main actors, as above. It doesn't matter if the subject is singular (one) or plural (two or more), it's still a simple subject if it's just one thing or one group of things (people, animals, things, ideas).

Compound subject: The cats and a dog played with the toy.

Here we have two *separate* actors or groups of actors (not just a plural subject) *doing* the same verb.

More examples of compound subjects:

Fruits and vegetables are good for you.

The girls and their mothers *went* shopping.

Running and skating are my favorite sports.

Contemplating nature and meditating on the meaning of life are nice things to do while on vacation.

Note: if a sentence does not contain a subject, it's a *sentence fragment*. Sometimes a fragment is a nice stylistic choice, but it has to be used carefully. Know what I mean? :)

Fragment examples (no subjects): Finished the race in record time. Went home to get dinner. Am going to bed early. Planning to take vacation. Just now leaving for work. Know what I mean?

Verbs

A verb shows action or a state of being. A main verb (predicate) works with the subject.

Action verbs

Action verbs are what most people think of when they think of verbs. Action verbs show a specific, easily identifiable behavior, activity, action, endeavor, or movement.

Example: The dog played with the toy.

Played is the *main verb* (also called the *predicate*) in this sentence because it's *the action performed by the subject*, which is *dog*.

Played is an action verb. Other action verbs include *run, talk, write, type, smile, argue, laugh, pretend, roam, socialize, and create* among many others.

Being or linking verbs

A *being or linking verb* is another kind of verb. It is often a form of the verb *to be*: *am, are, is, was, were, be, being, been*. It can also be forms of verbs like *feel, smell, taste, appear, sound, become*, and others.

They are called *being or linking verbs* because they don't really describe action. Being verbs rarely stand alone. *Linking* refers to the connection that is made between the *subject* and a *noun or adjective* that describes or renames the subject.

Here are some examples of *being* and *linking* verbs:

I exist.
The dog seems tired.
The dog is a good companion.
The dogs were playing hard.
They became friends.
I am very hungry.

Note: if a sentence does not contain a verb, it is a *sentence fragment*.

Examples: The dog with the toy. The girls in pretty dresses. The messy room with paint all over. Spaghetti with black olives, delicious artichokes, and sun-dried tomatoes.

Verbs often use helping verbs to show different meanings.

Helping verbs are used to show past, present, ongoing (progressive), and many other variations of verbs. They are often forms of the verbs *be*, *do*, *go*, and *have*.

The dog was playing with the toy.
The dog will play with the toy.
The dogs were playing with the toy.
The dogs are going to play with the toy.
I did play with the dog yesterday.
I have been playing with the dog for a few minutes.

Main verbs or predicates

The main verb is also called a **predicate** to differentiate it from other verbs that might occur in the sentence.

Both words—main verb and predicate—are used here to avoid confusion since this concept is taught in different ways in schools. The important thing to remember is that other verbs may exist in a sentence that are *not* the predicate or main verb.

Edwina jumped in the pool just as a big snake slithered in.

Slithered is a verb, but it's not the main verb, and *snake* isn't the subject (even if it grabs your attention more than Edwina does). In italics is the independent clause that makes this a complete sentence (the rest is a topic for another day).

Predicates are simple (one verb) or compound (two or more) just like subjects. The examples above are all simple predicates (helping verbs don't count).

A compound predicate has two main verbs, and they share the same subject.

Compound predicate examples:

Mary studied all night and went to class in the morning.
Tanisha was exhausted from running a marathon and went to bed early.

More examples of subjects and verbs:

The soup is delicious. (simple subject/simple predicate)
Jasmine danced all night. (simple subject/simple predicate)
Coretta and Mike decorated their new home. (compound subject/simple predicate)
The stream flowed fast and created a gully. (simple subject/compound predicate)

The independent clause

A **clause** is a group of words that contains a **subject** (simple or compound) **and** a **main verb** (simple or compound predicate).

An independent clause can stand alone because it's complete, it makes sense, and it does not start with any word that makes it *dependent* (a topic for another day but *because*, *even though*, and *since* are a few).

Learning to identify clauses in general (there are many types) and recognize independent clauses in particular is the most important thing you can do to master punctuation.

An independent clause is also called a *complete* or *simple sentence*.

The weather suddenly turned warm.

Flowers and grasses filled every part of the field.

She yawned.

Eva and Trevor went swimming.

Note: all example sentences in this lesson are independent clauses unless specified otherwise.

Coordinating conjunctions

Coordinating conjunctions are seven little words you've seen many times.
Coordinating conjunctions are connectors that coordinate.

and, or, nor, for, so, yet, but

Some tricks for remembering are FANBOYS, YAFNOBS, and FONYBAS.

Coordinating conjunctions *connect* words and parts of sentences.

Apples and oranges were in the bowl.

Men or women can wear this.

I was tired but hungry.

She had neither socks nor shoes.

Robert was awkward yet handsome.

The guests were waiting, so I served the food.*

His clothes were dirty, for he had worked all day.*

*Two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction is up next.



The #1 rule: Use a comma between two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction.

Her neighbor raked his lawn in the morning, **and** he mowed the grass late in the afternoon.

My friends enjoy the amusement park, **but** I prefer a quiet beach.

Jillian had loads of work to do today, **so** her assistant helped her.

If you've carefully reviewed all the previous information, you should be able to identify four parts in each sentence above:

- **subjects**
- **main verbs (predicates)**
- **coordinating conjunctions**
- **independent clauses**

This can get tricky, and once in awhile you can leave the comma out if one or both independent clauses are very short or you want a certain style: *I cooked and he cleaned.*

Most of the time, though, you should use a comma between two independent clauses when they're joined by a coordinating conjunction.

Note: Remember that this rule applies without regard for singular, plural, or compound subjects. It also doesn't matter if main verbs (predicates) are active, being/linking verbs, simple, or compound.

What happens if you forget a comma and a coordinating conjunction? You have a *run-on* or *fused sentence*.

My friends enjoy the amusement park I prefer a quiet beach.

Jillian had loads of work to do today her assistant helped her.

What if you forget the coordinating conjunction? You have a *comma splice*.

My friends enjoy the amusement park, I prefer a quiet beach.

Jillian had loads of work to do today, her assistant helped her.

PS Don't make these mistakes! Run-ons, especially, make reading very difficult.

Put your understanding of subjects, verbs, coordinating conjunctions, and independent clauses to work right now.

Where does the comma go in each of these sentences? Why?

1. Jorge decided to take time off from work but he waited until the weather was warmer.
2. I completed all my work today even though I only worked for a few hours.
3. Bridgette was the most popular girl in school and she graduated at the top of her class.
4. I could smell the salt in the air yet we were still many miles from the ocean.
5. I will take a train to see a show in New York or I will take the bus to the mountains to go skiing.

Answers are at the bottom of this page.

Now check your latest blog post, article, or other writing to see if you've used commas correctly.

Identify subjects, verbs, independent clauses, and coordinating conjunctions. Do the same thing as you write and edit your next blog post (or anything else). Practice, practice, practice.

Check other blog posts, articles, books, and magazines. Do other writers use commas and independent clauses correctly?

Stay tuned for next week's lesson!

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Answers: 1. work, but 2. no comma (there is no coordinating conjunction or other need for a comma)
3. school, and 4. air, yet 5. York, or