

WRITING TIPS

From the Writing Instructors at the Academic Support Center

WRITING CLEAR SENTENCES

The key to accurate and clear sentences lies in simply identifying CLAUSES.

- There are 2 types of clauses: INDEPENDENT and DEPENDENT. They both have a subject and a verb, but only an independent clause can stand alone. All dependent clauses must be joined to an independent clause.
- All sentences must have at least ONE independent clause and may also have one or more dependent clauses.
- All sentences and clauses have at least one subject and one verb. Identifying all subjects and verbs in the sentence precedes identifying the type of clause(s) in the sentence.
- A sentence with just one independent clause is a simple sentence. A sentence with independent and dependent clause(s) is a complex sentence, and a sentence with 2 or more independent clauses is a compound sentence.
- Properly identifying the type of clauses in the sentence will lead to accurate punctuation and to the elimination of comma splices, run-on sentences, and sentence fragments.

TIPS FOR FINDING SUBJECTS AND VERBS IN A SENTENCE OR CLAUSE

- First, find the VERB(S) in the sentence, which can lead you to the SUBJECT(S).
 - The verb may be either an action word (to run) or a state-of-being word (it was). The verb may also be more than one word (he can run).
- - Next, identify the SUBJECT(S) in the sentence, usually that to which the verb refers. Some things to remember about the subject:
 - The subject, although it usually precedes the verb, does not always do so. In a question, the verb usually precedes the subject:
Ex: Can we think about it? (“we” is the subject.)
 - Although all subjects are nouns or pronouns, not all nouns are subjects, and a noun in a prepositional phrase is NEVER a subject:
Ex: After dinner, we watched a movie. (“we” is the subject; “dinner” is a noun but is a part of a prepositional phrase; “movie” is a noun but is the object of the clause.)
 - Sometimes the subject of a sentence is implied, not written, as in a command:
Ex: Watch your step. (“You” is the implied subject.)
 - Infinitives and gerunds, which look like verbs but are simply verbals, are nouns and are often the subject of the sentence:
Ex: Whistling and skipping are signs of happiness. (“Whistling” and “skipping” are gerund nouns and are the subject; “signs” is a noun but is the object of the sentence; “happiness” is a noun in a prepositional phrase.)
 - “There” and “here” are never the subject of a sentence:
Ex: Here is the paper. (“paper” is the subject.)

Once all the subjects and verbs in a sentence have been identified, you can determine the type of sentence it is (simple, compound, complex) and how many independent and dependent clauses there are. Good writers include a variety of sentence types in their writing.

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TIPS FOR PUNCTUATING CLAUSES

INDEPENDENT CLAUSES: They have at least one subject and one verb and express a complete thought. They can stand alone as a sentence.

Ex: It was raining. I took my umbrella.

DEPENDENT OR SUBORDINATE CLAUSES: They have at least one subject and one verb, but they do NOT express a complete thought because they usually begin with a subordinating conjunction or a relative pronoun.

Ex: Because it was raining, I took my umbrella.

(In this example, the dependent clause precedes the independent clause.)

It is essential that you learn the subordinating words which introduce dependent clauses, and these are listed in the SENTENCE STRUCTURE KEY. The KEY also includes the rules of punctuation for combining clauses.

SIX EXAMPLES OF CLAUSE PUNCTUATION

I gave a party. Everybody came.

I gave a party; everybody came.

I gave a party; moreover, everybody came.

I gave a party, and everybody came.

When I gave a party, everybody came.

Everybody came when I gave a party.

Two Independent Clauses

2 Ind. Cl. joined by a semi-colon

2 Ind. Cl. joined by conj. Adverb

2 Ind. Cl. joined by a “fanboy.”

1 Dep. Cl. before an Ind. Cl.

1 Dep. Cl. after an Ind. Cl.