THE WRITING CENTER

Sentence Structure

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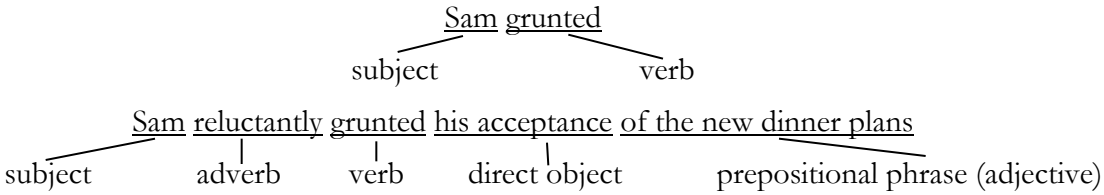
As is the case with many aspects of writing, sentence structure is conventional: the rules that govern the structure of English sentences are neither absolute nor arbitrary. Understanding the conventions for structuring sentences allows writers to communicate information clearly and effectively. We all implicitly rely on these conventions when reading, so we should be aware of how the structure of our own sentences will affect the clarity of what we write. Put simply, sentence structure is a tool for making effective use of our audience's expectations, and our primary goal in approaching sentence structure should always be improving the clarity of our ideas.

Clauses and sentence structure

English sentences can be grouped into **four basic types of sentence structure**: simple, compound, complex and compound-complex. These classifications indicate the number of clauses in the sentence and the relationships between those clauses. Most effective writing styles make use of all four types of sentence structure.

A **clause** consists of a **subject** (the noun, person or object that performs the action), a **predicate** (the verb or action performed) and **any objects or modifiers** (direct objects, predicate nominatives, adverbs, adjectives, prepositional phrases, etc.) that attach to the subject and predicate.



Both of the clauses above have the same subject and verb. The second sentence also contains a direct object, and modifiers in the form of an adverb and a prepositional phrase.

Simple sentences

A **simple sentence** is a single clause that expresses a complete thought; it is also known as an **independent clause** because it can stand on its own. **Every English sentence includes at least one independent clause.** A simple sentence can have compound subjects, compound verbs, or even compound subjects and verbs:

Bill and Frank play baseball.	Compound subject
Frank plays baseball and watches Major League games.	Compound verb
Bill and Frank play baseball and watch Major League games.	Compound subject and verb

In the context of a paper or longer work, **simple sentences are often used to emphasize a point** because they push the reader to focus on a single fact or action. The main weakness of simple sentences is they don't tell your readers how individual points are related to one another. When we need to show relationships between thoughts, we use the conventions of compound and complex sentences.

Compound sentences

A **compound sentence** consists of two independent clauses joined by a comma and conjunction, a semicolon, or a colon. The relationship between the two thoughts is most often communicated by the conjunction that joins the clauses together. For instance, "Bill plays baseball, and Frank watches Major League games" presents a different meaning than "Bill plays baseball, but Frank watches Major League games." The first sentence emphasizes the two men's common interest in baseball while the second sentence emphasizes the difference in their level of participation. Either compound sentence provides the reader with more information than two simple sentences made from the same clauses ("Bill plays baseball. Frank watches Major League games"). A compound sentence displays the relationship between two facts, actions or ideas, and it presents the information communicated by each clause as having equal importance. (For more information on joining independent clauses, see our handout on "Semicolons and Colons.")

Complex sentences

A **complex sentence** consists of one independent clause with one or more dependent clauses. A **dependent clause** is a subject/verb cluster that does not express a complete thought and cannot stand alone as a simple sentence. Dependent clauses are also known as **subordinate clauses** because the information they express is subordinated to (presented as less important than) the information in the sentence's independent clause. Dependent clauses often contain background information or information that presents the independent clause in a particular light.

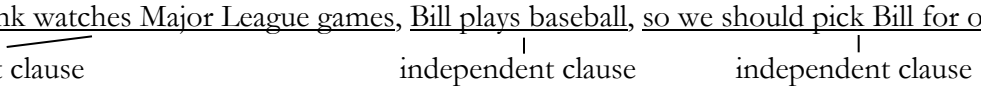
"Although Bill plays baseball, Frank watches Major League games" puts the emphasis on Frank's knowledge of MLB and might give us reason to believe Frank over Bill when they disagree about who Roger Clemens played for in 1998.

"While Frank watches Major League games, Bill plays baseball" would give us reason to pick Bill over Frank in the company softball game. In each case, **the subject and verb of the independent clause is the main focus of the complex sentence**.

Dependent clauses always serve as nouns, adjectives or adverbs. In a **noun clause**, the entire clause acts like a single noun and can be a subject, a direct object, an appositive, an object of a preposition, etc. For example, the last clause in the sentence "A clause serves as a noun if it is the object of a preposition" is a noun clause used as the object of a preposition. In an **adjective or adverb clause**, the entire clause serves as a single modifier. If an adjective or adverb clause comes at the beginning of a sentence, it always modifies the subject of the sentence. If the clause comes anywhere else in the sentence, it modifies the verb or noun that comes immediately before the clause.

Compound-complex sentences

Writers can combine three or more clauses into a **compound-complex sentence**, which is a compound sentence that also includes at least one dependent clause. Every compound-complex sentence will have at least three clauses.



Because they place several clauses in explicit relationship to one another, **compound-complex sentences can express more nuance than any other sentence structure, but their complexity can strain the reader's attention and risk possible misreading**. While they are tremendously useful and sometimes necessary, they require careful planning.

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