Basic Sentence Structure

In order to understand the basic parts that make up a sentence, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of clauses. Clauses are groups of words that have a subject and a verb but may not contain a complete thought. There are two kinds of clauses: independent clauses (main or principle) or dependent clauses (subordinate).

**Independent Clauses**

An independent clause consists of a group of words that have a subject and a verb and communicates a complete thought. An independent clause is a simple sentence.

  e.g. My mother baked bread.

In this sentence, **mother** is the subject and **baked** is the verb. This sentence also communicates a complete thought.

**Dependent Clauses**

A dependent clause consists of a group of words that have a subject and a verb but does not communicate a complete thought. In other words, a dependent clause is not a simple sentence.

  e.g. Unless Bill makes some money.

In this sentence, **Bill** is the subject and **makes** is the verb, but this clause does not communicate a complete thought. The reader is left waiting for more information to finish the message.

Clauses are dependent when they begin with a subordinating conjunction or a relative pronoun.
Words commonly used as subordinating conjunctions:

- after
- although
- as
- as (far/soon) as
- as if
- because
- before
- even if
- how
- if
- in as much as
- in case (that)
- in order (that)
- in so far as
- in that
- lest
- no matter how
- now that
- provided (that)
- since
- so that
- supposing (that)
- than
- that
- though
- till
- unless
- until
- when, whenever
- whether
- while
- why

Relative pronouns used as subordinating conjunctions

- that
- who
- whomever
- whose
- what
- whoever
- whom
- which

Exercise 1: Determine whether or not the following groups of words are clauses.

a) under the apple tree
b) when he decided
c) the entire faculty was in attendance
d) in the junkyard by the winding road
e) unless the doctor advises not to

Simple Sentences

A simple sentence is equivalent to an independent clause. It contains a subject and a verb and communicates a complete thought. A simple sentence that has a multiple subject is said to have a compound subject and a simple sentence that has a multiple verb is said to have a compound verb. It is possible to have both a compound subject and a compound verb.

e.g. The mother and father kissed and hugged their newborn child.

In this sentence, **mother** and **father** make up the compound subject and **kissed** and **hugged** make up the compound verb.
Compound Sentences

A compound sentence is made up of two or more independent clauses. Each clause could stand alone as a simple sentence; however, the fact that these sentences are somehow related in thought offers the writer the option of joining them together.

The two independent clauses can be joined in one of three ways:

1. with a comma and a coordinate conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) FANBOYS
   
   e.g. John went to school. Jill went to work.
   John went to school, and Jill went to work.
   
   e.g. The weather was fine. The game was still cancelled.
   The weather was fine, but the game was still cancelled.

2. with a semicolon
   
   e.g. The Rocky Mountains are impressive. They reach very high elevations
   The Rocky Mountains are impressive; they reach very high elevations.

   NOTE: When you use a semicolon to connect independent clauses, be sure that they are closely related in thought.

3. with a semicolon, adverbial conjunction and a comma
   
   e.g. I saw only part of that movie. I can’t really comment on the theme.
   I saw only part of that movie; therefore, I can’t really comment on the theme.
Other common adverbial conjunctions:

also           incidentally            nonetheless
anyway         indeed                  otherwise
besides        instead                 still
Consequently   Likewise                Then
finally         meanwhile               therefore
furthermore    moreover                thus
hence          nevertheless             however
next

Failure to punctuate a compound sentence correctly will result in a run-on sentence.

**Exercise 2:** Identify the following sentences as either simple or compound.

a) Cloaked in russet and brown, autumn graciously arrived to celebrate the harvest and to prepare the land for winter.

b) Diesel trains are fast, but steam locomotives are more colorful by far.

c) The caboose, with its bright red paint, is a childhood favorite of many people.

d) Helicopters take off vertically; they can hover in the air.

e) Towboats pull barges; however, they aren’t designed for carrying passengers.

**Complex Sentences**

A complex sentence is made up of one independent clause and one or more dependent clauses. Remember that the dependent clause cannot stand alone as a simple sentence because it does not state a complete thought. It must be joined to an independent clause.

e.g. Before he finished raking the leaves, he swept the walk.

Both clauses have a subject and a verb, but only “he swept the walk” states a complete thought.

**NOTE:** Dependent clauses begin with subordinating conjunctions or relative pronouns.
Exercise 3: In the following sentences, identify the independent clauses and the dependent clauses.

a) Until the gourds had ripened, we would not pick them.

b) Sandra, who was in that accident, was lucky.

c) Everyone made careful preparations since winter would soon follow.

d) He inhaled the wood smoke, which had an acrid smell.

e) Even though it is sunny outside, the temperature is very cold.

Exercise 4: Identify the following sentences as simple, compound or complex.

a) Although the opal is a common stone, only the “iridescent” opals are valuable.

b) Sternwheelers are romantic, and they are quite historical as well.

c) If I suddenly became wealthy, I would collect gems as a hobby.

d) Colombia is the country of emeralds.

e) Man-made rubies are soft and dull in color

Compound-Complex Sentences

A compound-complex sentence is made up of two or more independent clauses and one or more dependent clauses.

e.g. As the snow continued to fall, we tried to keep up with the shoveling but we were unsuccessful.

The two independent clause (joined by the coordinating conjunction “but”) are “we tried to keep up with the shoveling” and “we were unsuccessful”. The dependent clause (introduced by the subordinating conjunction “as”) is “As the snow continued to fall”

Exercise 5: Identify the following as simple, compound, complex or compound-complex.

a) Although Ralph is a miser, he plays the guitar very well, and we all enjoy his parties.

b) I go fishing every chance I get; however, I have never caught a fish.

c) Runners on sleds cut through snow and glide over ice.

d) Stop at the Dixie Queen and the Delta Lady, located at Wharf Nine.

e) Would you like a recipe for fudge, which is very good, or do you have a cookbook?

f) I capsized my rowboat, and all my equipment was lost in the river.
g) The aster has the Greek name for “star”.

h) Water, which is gathered by large roots, is stored in the stems of the cacti.

i) Unless you have a better idea, let’s go to the movies.

j) Before you leave for the day, check the weather; you may need to dress accordingly.

Information and exercises adapted from:


The Good Grammar Workshop – Sentences and Paragraphs by The Perfection Form Company.
Answer Key

Exercise 1
a) no
b) yes
c) yes
d) no
e) yes

Exercise 2
a) simple
b) compound
c) simple
d) compound
e) compound

Exercise 3
a) Until the gourds had ripened – dependent
we would not pick them – independent
b) Sandra . . . was lucky – independent
who was in that accident – dependent
c) Everyone made careful preparations – independent
since winter would soon follow – dependent
d) He inhaled the wood smoke – independent
which had an acrid scent – dependent
e) Even though it is sunny outside, - dependent
the temperature is very cold - independent

Exercise 4
a) complex
b) compound
c) complex
d) simple
e) simple
Exercise 5

a) compound-complex
b) compound
c) simple
d) simple
e) compound-complex
f) compound
g) simple
h) complex
i) complex
j) compound-complex