

Clauses: Essential Building-Blocks

Definition

A clause is a group of related words containing a subject and a verb. A clause can be usefully distinguished from a phrase, which is a group of related words that does not contain a subject-verb relationship, such as "in the morning" or "running down the street" or "having grown used to this harassment." A review of the different kinds of phrases might be helpful.

Words We Use to Talk about Clauses

Learning the various terms used to define and classify clauses can be a vocabulary lesson in itself. This handout categorizes clauses into **independent** and **dependent** clauses. This simply means that some clauses can stand by themselves, as separate sentences, and some cannot. Another term for dependent clause is subordinate clause; this means that the clause is subordinate to another element (the independent clause) and depends on that other element for its meaning. The subordinate clause is created by a subordinating conjunction or dependent word.

An independent clause--"She is older than her brother"--can be its own sentence. It can be turned into a dependent or subordinate clause when the same group of words begins with a dependent word or, as in this case, a subordinating conjunction: "Because she is older than her brother, she tells him what to do."

Clauses are also classified as **restrictive** and **nonrestrictive** clauses. The words **essential** and **nonessential** are sometimes used to mean the same things. British grammarians use the terms **defining** and **nondefining**. A nonrestrictive clause is not essential to the meaning of the sentence; it can be removed from the sentence without changing its basic meaning. A nonrestrictive clause, especially if it's in the middle of a sentence, is often set apart from the rest of the sentence by a comma or a pair of commas.

- *Professor Villa, who used to be a secretary for the President, can type 132 words a minute.*

Relative clauses are dependent clauses introduced by a **relative pronoun**--that, which, whichever, who, whoever, whom, whomever, whose, and of which. Relative clauses can be either restrictive or nonrestrictive. Review the proper usage of commas for additional help in determining whether relative clauses are restrictive or nonrestrictive, parenthetical or nonparenthetical, and whether commas should be used to set them off from the rest of the sentence. In a relative clause, the relative pronoun is the subject of the verb--remember that all clauses contain a subject-verb relationship--and refers or relates to something preceding the clause.

- *Giuseppe said that the plantar wart, which had been bothering him for years, had to be removed.*

The above sentence has three clauses—**independent**, **restrictive**, and **nonrestrictive**. The independent clause depends on the subject-verb relationship "George said." The restrictive clause depends on the subject-verb relationship "wart had." The nonrestrictive clause—"which had been bothering him for years"--can be removed from the sentence without changing its meaning, so it is set off by commas.

Some relative clauses will refer to more than a single word in the preceding text; they can modify an entire clause or even a series of clauses.

- *Charlie didn't get the job in administration, which really surprised his friends*
- *Charlie didn't get the job in administration, and he didn't even apply for the Dean's position, which really surprised his friends.*

A relative clause that refers to or modifies entire clauses in this manner is called a **sentential clause**. Sometimes the "which" of a sentential clause will get tucked into the clause as the determiner of a noun.

- *Charlie might very well take a job as headmaster, in which case the school might as well close down.*

Finally, everybody's favorite clause is **the Santa Clause**, which needs no further definition.

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Independent Clauses

Independent clauses could stand by themselves as discrete sentences, except that when they do stand by themselves, separated from other clauses, they are normally referred to simply as sentences, not clauses. In order to avoid sentence fragments and run-on sentences, writers must be able to recognize a clause and to know when a clause is capable of acting as an independent unit. Needless to say, it is important to learn how to combine independent clauses into larger units of thought. Take the following sentence for an example.

- *Bob didn't mean to do it, but he did it anyway.*

We have two independent clauses--"Bob didn't mean to do it" and "he did it anyway"--connected by a comma and a coordinating conjunction, "but." If the word "but" is removed from this sentence, two independent clauses would be incorrectly connected, with only a comma between them. Such a grammar miscue is known as a comma splice.

Subordination involves turning one of the clauses into a subordinate element, one that cannot stand on its own, through the use of a subordinating conjunction, dependent word, or relative pronoun. When the clause begins with a subordinating word, it is no longer an independent clause; it is called a dependent or subordinate clause because it depends on something else, the independent clause, for its meaning. There are other ways of combining ideas, such as turning independent clauses into various kinds of modifying phrases. Check the grammar conventions for avoiding primer language.

- *Although Ramonita often thought about joining the choir, she never talked to her friends about it.*
- *Ramonita never talked to her friends about joining the choir, because she was afraid they would make fun of her.*
- *Yasmin is Ramonita's sister. Yasmin told Ramonita to join the choir no matter what her friends said.*

Test your comprehension of clauses by underlining the different types of clauses. Use one line for the main or independent clause, two lines for relative clauses, and three lines for subordinate clauses. Check with a tutor for the correct responses.

1. **The doctor told Charlie to lose weight and exercise vigorously for forty-five minutes a day.**
2. **The doctor was worried that Charlie was putting on too much weight.**
3. **Charlie has a hard time sticking to a diet; he really loves rich, sweet desserts.**
4. **In fact, the last time he tried to lose weight, he ended up actually gaining weight.**
5. **Charlie has decided to hire a personal trainer because he is worried about his heart.**
6. **His new personal trainer, whose name is Adriana Bongiorno, thinks Charlie may be a lost cause.**
7. **She can make him do the exercises, but she cannot make him stick to the diet.**
8. **He is very good as long as Miss Bongiorno is around, but he goes to the freezer for ice-cream when she leaves.**
9. **Charlie must learn that eating all those sweets may give him a temporary pleasure but that it is not good for his heart and that he would feel better about himself if he stopped eating all those rich and sweet foods that are not good for him.**
10. **Miss Bunion is starting to make a difference, though, and Charlie is starting to make some progress.**