Comprehending Clauses

A clause is a group of words that contains a subject and a predicate. Remember that a subject tells who or what the group of words is about. The predicate tells what the subject is or does.

*The girl in the red hat picked and smelled a flower.*

In the sentence above, the subject is “the girl in the red hat.” The clause is about her. The predicate is “picked and smelled a flower.” The predicate tells what the subject, “the girl in the red hat,” does.

If a clause has definite meaning without the addition of any other words, it is a sentence. It is also called an independent clause or main clause. It can stand alone.

**A SENTENCE = AN INDEPENDENT OR MAIN CLAUSE**

A group of words that contains a subject and a predicate but which makes no sense by itself is called a dependent clause. A dependent clause depends or relies upon further clarification to reveal its meaning. It cannot stand alone.

*Although I studied diligently…*

This group of words fits the definition of a clause. It has a subject (“I”) and a predicate (“studied diligently”). However, it makes no sense when read alone. It requires or is dependent upon the addition of further words to make a clear statement or create a complete thought.

*Although I studied diligently, I did not pass the test.*

Because “although I studied diligently” depends upon the addition of another clause to make sense, it is called a dependent clause. A dependent clause is also known as a subordinate clause; it is less important than the main clause, which is “I did not pass the test.”

Dependent or subordinate clauses have many different functions; they may appear at beginnings, middles, or endings of sentences. However, what is most important is that a writer be able to recognize and use them appropriately. A good rule of thumb is to read a group of words aloud to see if it makes sense alone. If those words can stand by themselves, they form a main or independent clause, or a sentence. If they do not make sense alone, they form a dependent or subordinate clause and must be attached to a main or independent clause.
Certain words signal to the writer that a group of words forms a dependent, or subordinate, clause. First, of course, look for a subject and a predicate. Second, watch for **subordinate conjunctions** like *after, although, as, because, before, if, since, though, unless, until, when, where, and while*. (See a grammar handbook for a complete list of subordinating conjunctions.)

*Unless I receive a letter of explanation, I will not pay the bill.*

A comma usually separates a dependent clause that precedes an independent clause. However, if an independent clause precedes the dependent clause, a comma is not necessary.

*I will not pay the bill unless I receive a letter of explanation.*

Signal words for clauses may also appear in the middle of a sentence. Examples are *that, who, which,* and *where*.

*The book that I lost was not mine.*

Do not use commas around the clause if it restricts or specifies the meaning to a particular person or thing. “That I lost” implies a specific book. If the clause does NOT restrict meaning (if you can remove it and retain the original sense of the sentence), then you need commas around the clause.

*The book, which was awfully boring, was not mine.*

Other signal words, called **coordinating conjunctions**, appear in the middle of a group of words to join two independent clauses or sentences. Examples are *for, and, nor, but, or, yet,* and *so.* (hint: FANBOYS)

*I like strawberries, but I am allergic to them.*

Each of the above clauses makes sense by itself. Note that a comma always appears before the coordinating conjunction separating two independent clauses.

***This is a very basic review of clauses. Exceptions will occur for which you should consult a basic grammar text or a writing center tutor.***