



Writing Center
Academic Affairs

Understanding 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. ******