



Clauses & Sentence Structures

What is a clause?

To create interesting, varied sentences, you need to understand what clauses are. A **clause** is a group of words that contains both a subject and its verb. Clauses differ from **phrases**, which may contain nouns, verbs, prepositions, and many other elements, but never a subject and verb together. (See the “Types of Phrases” handout for more on phrases.)

Independent and Subordinate Clauses

Clauses may be either independent or subordinate (dependent). An **independent clause** can be a complete sentence in itself. It contains a subject and verb, and it expresses a complete thought. Independent clauses are not necessarily short or simple; they may contain compound subjects, verbs, or object, or contain modifying phrases. Each of the following sentences contains just one independent clause:

- Ham Polo and Luke Cloudwobbler ran from the Drizzle Troopers. (compound subject)
- The heroes paused and leapt over the gaping chasm. (compound verb)
- The ship holding the smuggled cargo came into view. (participial phrase)

A **subordinate or dependent clause**, by contrast, cannot stand alone as a sentence even though it contains a subject and verb. Notice how subordinate clauses by themselves sound incomplete:

- Although they had escaped the Drizzle Troopers
- Which would not be an easy feat

Such clauses are *dependent* upon their independent clauses to complete their meaning, and their ideas are always *subordinate* to those contained in the independent clauses. (See the “Coordination & Subordination” handout for more specifics.) Each of the following sentences combines a subordinate clause with an independent clause:

- Although they had escaped the Drizzle Troopers, Ham Polo was still worried.
- They would have to blast their way out of the *Deathcomet*, which would not be an easy feat.

Why do clauses matter?

A knowledge of clauses is essential to understanding the four basic sentence structures—which, in turn, are essential for creating varied and interesting writing, as we shall see . . .

Sentence Structures

Independent and subordinate clauses can be combined into four basic sentences structures:

A **simple sentence** contains one (and only one) independent clause.

- Ham Polo took his place at the navigation controls.

A **compound sentence** contains two or more independent clauses (but no subordinate clauses). These two clauses can be joined by a comma and coordinating conjunction, a semicolon, or a semicolon with a conjunctive adverb. (See also the "Sentence Fragments/Run-On Sentences" and "Coordination & Subordination" handouts.)

- Chewgacka the Woofie acted as copilot, and Luke Cloudwobbler manned the guns.
- Ham Polo hit the accelerator; the *Century Vulture* lurched forward.
- The ship had cleared the *Deathcomet*; however, the heroes were still in danger.

A **complex sentence** contains one (and only one) independent clause plus one or more subordinate clauses. In the following examples the subordinate clauses are underlined:

- Luke Cloudwobbler fired the blasters while Ham Polo dodged Drizzle Trooper ships.
- After successfully evading the Drizzle Troopers, the heroes celebrated until Chewgacka pointed out that they had now entered an asteroid field.

A **compound-complex sentence** contains two or more independent clauses and at least one subordinate clause. In the examples below, subordinate clauses are underlined once and independent clauses are double-underlined:

- Before they could even begin to deal with that problem, Chewgacka let out another Woofie wail, and Ham Polo echoed the sentiment when he saw that the ship was almost out of fuel.
- The heroes would escape, but it would require daring and luck which they have in abundance as we shall see when the story continues.

Why do sentence structures matter?

Good writers use sentence structures purposefully. Complex and compound-complex structures allow for a subtle arrangement of thought because they help writers show precisely how their ideas are related to one another. Although they seem to be the most elaborate of the sentence structures, complex and compound-complex sentences are actually the staple of academic writing where intricate, abstract ideas must be explained clearly. Compound sentences can be used to balance similar ideas, but they should not be used merely to make short sentences longer. Finally, simple sentences add punch to your writing. A paper composed entirely of compound-complex sentences would quickly become tedious, so aim for variety with precision, using the different sentence structures to help you communicate clearly and with style.