



## Coordination & Subordination

Independent and subordinate (dependent) clauses can be combined in a variety of ways (see “Clauses & Sentence Structures” handout). Effective writers take advantage of this fact to help readers understand the relative importance of their ideas.

### Using Coordination

When writers have two ideas of relatively equal importance, they **coordinate** them. The seven **coordinating conjunctions** are one way to do this. They are:

**and, but, or, for, nor, so, yet**

Similar to the coordinating conjunctions are the **correlative conjunctions**, but they always come in pairs:

**neither . . . nor, either . . . or,  
both . . . and, not only . . . but also**

These two types of conjunctions can join words, phrases, or clauses of equal importance, even though the things being joined may be opposite or contradictory (see also the “Parallelism & Emphasis” handout).

- Coordination of words: I left my keys **and** books somewhere.
- Coordination of phrases: I left my keys **either** on the counter **or** in my bag.
- Coordination of clauses: I eventually found my keys, **but** I was late to my class.

Note that when a coordinating or correlative conjunction joins two clauses, a comma is required at the end of the first clause. No comma is needed to join words or phrases.

A third type of conjunction, **conjunctive adverbs**, can also join clauses. Be warned, however, that conjunctive adverbs can also be used alone with an independent clause. (. . . as the word *however* is used in that last sentence!) The array of conjunctive adverbs offers writers many subtle shades of meaning:

**accordingly, also, anyway, besides, certainly, consequently, conversely,  
finally, furthermore, hence, however, incidentally, indeed, instead,  
likewise, meanwhile, moreover, nevertheless, next, nonetheless, otherwise,  
similarly, specifically, still, subsequently, then, therefore, thus**

When conjunctive adverbs join two independent clauses, use a semicolon before the conjunctive adverb and a comma after it:

- I left my keys in my car; **consequently,** I had to call a locksmith.

## Using Subordination

Coordination is useful when writers wish to join similar thoughts or to contrast equally important ideas. Sometimes, though, writers wish to express two related but unequal thoughts. Compare:

- While I was hit by a bus, I was walking to the store.
- While I was walking to the store, I was hit by a bus.

Clearly the vital piece of information here is that I WAS HIT BY A BUS!!! The second sentence conveys this more clearly because it **subordinates** the idea that I was walking to the store, making it less important than the fact that I was hit by a bus.

**Subordinating conjunctions** allow writers to subordinate one idea to another:

**after, although, as, as if, as though, because, before, even though, if, in order that, once, since, so that, than, that, though, unless, until, when, whenever, where, wherever, whether, while**

The five **relative pronouns** serve a similar function:

**who, whom, whose, which, that**

- **Although** I was hit by a bus, I lived to tell about it.
- My mother always told me to be more careful **so that** I wouldn't get hit by a bus.
- **After** my incident with the bus, I will certainly be more careful **whenever** I am crossing the street, **which** is something I do frequently **since** I walk everywhere.

The underlined phrases in the examples above are the independent clauses and receive the most emphasis, but the subordinating conjunctions and relative pronouns allow the writer to explain the reasons for the main action. They qualify and explain.

Note that if a subordinate (dependent) clause comes first, a comma should separate it from the independent clause. No comma is needed when the independent clause comes first unless it is necessary to make the meaning clear.

## How do I apply coordination and subordination in my writing?

First, be cautious of using long strings of simple sentences with few transitional expressions. This leads either to (1) providing unclear relationships between ideas, thus confusing your reader, or (2) implying that every idea is equally important.

Second, be careful not to coordinate ideas that actually have different weights (as in the bus example). Draw attention to the most important ideas by subordinating others.

Third, consciously combine sentences into more complicated structures. This not only better shows relationships between ideas, but also varies your prose, giving it rhythm and balance.

Finally, coordination and subordination can be used to correct run-on sentences and comma splices. See the Writing Center handout "Sentence Fragments & Run-Ons" for more details.