



Sentence Structures

A long series of simple sentences will make writing seem choppy, like this:

- MS is a disease scientists have known about for a long time. It makes people feel tired and weak. Most patients don't even know they have it. Sometimes they are unable to move for days at a time. My best friend has MS. Most days she seems pretty normal. I went to see her last weekend. She couldn't get out of bed.

But it's not just a matter of style. Our readers need to know how all of the ideas are connected. For this, use different kinds of sentence structures to organize your information appropriately.

The English language allows us to create four different sentence structures to help organized information. These sentence structures are based on two types of clauses, so first let's look at two kinds of clauses:

Independent and Dependent Clauses

Independent clauses are also known as complete sentences. These contain a subject and a predicate, a term which refers to both the verb and the "complete thought" of the sentence. Independent clauses can have compound elements, such as multiple subjects, multiple verbs, or multiple objects. They can also have modifying phrases that are not clauses because they do not have a subject and a verb. Examples:

- "My friend and I went to see a movie together."
 - There are two subjects here: "my friend and I."
- "We drove through the canyon and climbed up its outer wall."
 - This sentence has only one subject, "we," but two verbs, "drove" and "climbed," each of which have their own objects, "through the canyon" and "up its outer wall."
- "The dog chasing the mailman will be taken to the pound next week."
 - "Chasing the mailman" is an adjectival phrase. This phrase gives us more information about the dog, but is not a clause since it has no subject. ("The dog" is the subject of "is.")

Dependent clauses come in many types but usually begin with a subordinating conjunction (see lists below) or a relative pronoun (who, whom, whose, which, that). Read alone, they do not constitute a "complete sentence." Dependent clauses in the following sentences are in bold. Read them out loud by themselves in order to see how they differ from independent clauses:

- **“While we were heading toward the metro station,** we heard a shout.”
 - The subject is “we.” The verb is “were heading.” The subordinating conjunction “while” indicates that some other action is further describing the main thought.
- “My mother, **who has traveled extensively,** took a vacation to Italy.”
 - The subject is “mother.” The verb is “took.” The relative pronoun “who” indicates we are merely adding additional information.
- The table **on which I was sitting** suddenly collapsed.
 - The subject is “the table.” The verb is “collapsed.” The relative pronoun “which” (preceded here by “on” so as not to end the clause with a preposition) indicates that we are specifying something about it (I was sitting on it).

Sentence Types

These two kinds of clauses can be combined to form four different sentence types:

- **Simple:** one (and only one) independent clause. All of the example sentences in the “independent clause” section above are simple sentences.
- **Compound:** two or more independent clause. The two clauses can be joined by a semicolon, by a comma and a coordinating conjunction, or by a semicolon and a conjunctive adverb (see the **Comma Splices** [handout](#)):
 - “The country has made its decision; therefore, we must forge ahead with determination.”
- **Complex:** no more than one independent clause with one or more dependent clauses. All of the sentences listed as examples in “dependent clauses” section are complex, but you can also add multiple dependent clauses:
 - “While we were attending the show, but after we had eaten dinner, and certainly before the night’s climax, we discovered a fascinating bit of information.”
- **Compound-complex:** at least two independent clauses and at least one dependent clause.
 - “Although I like bread and butter the best, I sometimes partake of dill, and once I took complete leave of my senses and ate a sweet pickle.”

Why does it matter?

Good writers use sentence types purposefully. Complex and compound-complex sentence structures allow for a more subtle arrangement of thought. Dependent clauses are just that, dependent on other ideas for their meaning. 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 GOT HIT BY A BUS!!!! The first sentence **subordinates** that idea, making it less important than the fact that we were walking to the store. The second sentence emphasizes the right piece of information, by placing it in an independent clause. Note that we cannot do this with compound sentence structures:

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

Which sentence has more emphasis? The first, because it clearly shows which idea is most important. The second does very little to tell the reader what to pay attention to.

Subordination and Coordination

Complex and compound sentence structures allow us to organize ideas by subordination and coordination. Subordination orders ideas hierarchically (one idea is less important than another), while coordination orders ideas linearly.

Subordinate ideas by using subordinating conjunctions and relative pronouns:

- after, although, as, as if, because, before, even though, if, in order that, rather than, since, so that, than, that, though, unless, until, when, where, whether, while

These words allow you to organize ideas of greater and lesser importance very specifically:

- **Although** I had purchased an Ipod in January, **before** the third generation model was issued, I purchased another one recently **because** my first one was stolen.
- **If** you like the white of the egg hard but the yolk velvety, take the eggs off direct heat **when** the water begins to boil, **since** this will halt the boiling process, **rather than** only turning off the stove and leaving them over the hot surface.

The underlined phrases represent the independent clauses and receive the most emphasis, but the subordinating conjunctions (in bold) allows us to explain the reasons for the main action. They qualify and explain.

To **coordinate** ideas, use coordinating conjunctions or conjunctive adverbs:

- And, or, nor, for, but, so, yet, accordingly, also, besides, certainly, consequently, conversely, finally, furthermore, hence, however, incidentally, indeed, likewise, meanwhile, moreover, nevertheless, next, nonetheless, otherwise, similarly, specifically, still, subsequently, then, therefore, thus

Coordination shows that two (or more) ideas are equally important, that they are parallel or hold each other in balance, even if they are opposite or contradictory:

- I wanted to be an astronaut **and** the president of the U.S., **but** I don't have good eyesight **and** I realized I hate politics.
- He is getting great grades; **moreover**, he is involved in many extracurricular activities. **Nonetheless**, his tuition payment is very overdue, and **therefore**, he cannot return next semester.

These conjunctions are similar to plus, minus and equal signs. In the first example, two things I wanted to be were cancelled out (or balanced out) by two facts that contradicted them.

Finally, there are other “transitional expressions” that can help explain how ideas are connected (see the [Transitions handout](#)).

So how do I use these structures?

First, be cautious of using long strings of simple sentences with few transitional expressions. This leads to either (1) providing unclear relationships between ideas thus confusing your reader or (2) saying that every idea is equally important—a high level of attention that readers cannot maintain for long periods of time.

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

Third, consciously combine sentences into more complicated structures, because you can. Not only does it better show relationships between ideas, it varies your prose, giving it rhythm, harmony, and balance.

Lists of conjunctive adverbs and subordinating conjunctions from Hacker. A Writer's Reference. 3rd ed., 1995.