



UNDERSTANDING GRAMMATICAL TERMS

Independent clause or main clause

Makes a complete statement and can stand alone as a sentence.

Coordinating conjunction

Is used to join grammatically equal elements (two verb phrases or two main clauses, for example): and, but, or, nor, so, yet, for.

I went to the store **but** did not buy anything.

The coordinating conjunction **but** joins the verb phrase “went to the store” with the verb phrase “did not buy anything.”

Subordinating conjunction

Begins a subordinate or dependent clause: 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.

Dependent clause or Subordinate clause

Begins with a subordinating word (see above) and cannot stand alone as a sentence.

Not a sentence: **If** you want to go with me.

The clause, If you want to go with me, is also called a **sentence fragment**.

Sentence fragment

A sentence fragment is an incomplete sentence.

Comma Use

- A dependent clause at the beginning of a sentence should be followed by a comma:

If you want to go with me, you need to get in the car.

- Introductory elements should be followed by a comma:

To finish the project, we had to visit several centers and interview staff members.

- Use a comma between main clauses (sentences) joined by a coordinating conjunction, not between coordinated word groups:

Here: We must include physical education in every child’s curriculum, and we must give every child the opportunity to exercise daily.

The word and joins the main clause we must include to the main clause we must give.

Not here: We must include physical education in every child’s curriculum, and must give every child the opportunity to exercise daily.

The word and simply joins coordinated word groups—the verbs must include and must give—so the comma is unnecessary.

Revised: We must include physical education in every child’s curriculum and must give every child the opportunity to exercise daily.

Appositive

A noun or a noun phrase that renames a noun nearby and that is not absolutely necessary to define or limit the meaning of that nearby noun. Set off appositives by commas.

An Appositive: A Christmas Carol, Dickens' most famous holiday story, has been a family favorite for generations.

Most famous holiday story renames A Christmas Carol but is not absolutely necessary to the meaning of the sentence because A Christmas Carol limits the meaning. That is, most readers would know that A Christmas Carol is Dickens' most famous holiday story.

Run-on or Fused sentence

Putting two sentences together without any punctuation or any connecting words creates a run-on or fused sentence.

Run on: If a client is always negative, I would have the client practice rational coping statements by doing this, the client develops a more positive thinking pattern.

Correct the run-on by separating the two sentences with a period.

Revised: If a client were always negative, I would have the client practice rational coping statements. By doing this, the client develops a more positive thinking pattern.

When sentences are closely related, separate them with a semicolon rather than a period:

She worked hard in college; she graduated high in her class.

Use a comma and a conjunction:

She worked hard in college, so she graduated high in her class.

Comma splice

Joining two complete sentences with a comma instead of with a semicolon, a comma and a conjunction, or a period creates a comma splice.

Comma splice: Technology feeds on itself, technology makes more technology possible.

Revised with a semicolon: Technology feeds on itself; technology makes more technology possible.

Revised with a comma and a conjunction: Technology feeds on itself, so technology makes more technology possible.

Revised with a period: Technology feeds on itself. Technology makes more technology possible.

Dangling modifier

A dangling modifier usually hangs on to the beginning of a sentence and does not seem to be attached to any other word in the sentence. You may know what is being modified, but that word is not in the sentence.

Dangling modifier: When a little boy, his mother took him out to lunch every Saturday.

Who was a little boy? The mother?

To repair a dangling modifier, you can change the modifier itself or add a subject to which the modifier clearly refers.

Revised by adding a subject to the modifier: When Carlos was a little boy, his mother took him out to lunch every Saturday.

The word Carlos has been added to clarify. Carlos was the little boy.

Dangling modifier: Working nonstop, the project will be finished.

Who is working nonstop? The project?

Revised by adding a subject to which the modifier clearly refers: Working nonstop, we will finish the project.

We is the new subject – We are working nonstop.

Misplaced modifier

A misplaced modifier is a modifier placed at such a distance that the word(s) it modifies is unclear:

Misplaced modifier: The clinic provided a disabled doctor for the children.

Is the doctor disabled?

Revised: The clinic provided a doctor specially trained to treat disabled children.

The modifier was moved next to the word it actually modified.

Vague, Broad References

The words it, this, that, and which are often used as shortcuts to refer to something mentioned earlier. Sometimes the reference is needlessly vague or broad.

Too Broad: When counseling various clients, I always try to respect viewpoints that differ from my own. This helps them to feel comfortable with me.

This refers too broadly to the idea expressed in the preceding sentence.

Revised: When counseling various clients, I always try to respect viewpoints that differ from my own. This tolerance helps them to feel comfortable with me.

Following this by a specific noun or noun phrase (in this case, tolerance) can make the reference clear. An alternative might be to substitute a noun for this.

Ambiguous Reference

Occurs when the pronoun could refer to more than one antecedent.

Ambiguous: When Gloria set the pitcher on the glass-topped table, it broke.

What broke – the pitcher or the glass-topped table?

Revised: When Gloria set the pitcher on the glass-topped table, the pitcher broke.

Revise, perhaps repeating a word, to eliminate the confusion.

Wordiness

The constructions there is, there are, there was, and there were can sometimes contribute to wordiness in a sentence. The same is sometimes true of constructions beginning with it.

There are many factors that can contribute to nosocomial infections.

Revised: Many factors can contribute to nosocomial infections.

It is important that hospital personnel wash hands before and after glove use.

Revised: Hospital personnel must wash hands before and after glove use.

Passive voice

A form of the verb to be (be, am, is, are, was, were, being, and been) + the past participle of a verb (in regular verbs, the ed form of the verb) + (often, but not always) the word by.

Forms of the verb to be and passive voice are often not as vigorous as active verbs and can also contribute to wordiness.

Passive voice: She helped to cheer up the family when the jack-o-lantern was ruined by the cat. What ought to be the subject of the sentence (the cat) follows the verb.

Revised to active voice: She helped to cheer up the family when the cat ruined the jack-o-lantern.

Parallel structure

Coordinated elements must be parallel in structure (e.g. all should be nouns; all verbs should be in the same form or tense)

Not parallel: The object of surgery on the lip is to close the cleft so that scarring will be minimal, appearance is pleasing, and the face develops normally.

Revised: The object of surgery on the lip is to close the cleft so that scarring will be minimal, appearance will be pleasing, and the face will develop normally.

The revised version is now parallel because the verbs are all in the future tense – that is, each verb phrase is worded similarly, including the word will.

Subject-Verb agreement

Though word groups may come between the subject and the verb, a verb must agree with its subject.

Not in Agreement: A committee of three students organize the reunion.

Revised: A committee of three students organizes the reunion.

Committee, the subject of the sentence, is singular and thus requires the singular verb organizes.

Pronoun-Antecedent agreement

A pronoun and its antecedent (the word to which the pronoun refers) must agree in number.

Not in Agreement: A person may not recognize their disorder.

Person is singular in number; their is plural.

Revised: A person may not recognize his or her disorder.

Or -- People may not recognize their disorders.

People is plural in number; their is also plural.