



Independent and Dependent Clauses (Definitions)

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When you want to use commas and semicolons in sentences and when you are concerned about whether a sentence is or is not a fragment, a good way to start is to be able to recognize dependent and independent clauses. The definitions offered here will help you with this.

This handout will:

- define independent and dependent clauses
 - explain proper ways to punctuate sentences that use them
 - note some common errors to avoid
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Definitions

Independent Clause (IC)

An independent clause is a group of words that contains a subject and verb and expresses a complete thought. An independent clause is a sentence.

Example: Jim studied in the Sweet Shop for his chemistry quiz. (IC)

Dependent Clause (DC)

A dependent clause is a group of words that contains a subject and verb but does not express a complete thought. A dependent clause cannot be a sentence. Often a dependent clause is marked by a **dependent marker word**.

Example: When Jim studied in the Sweet Shop for his chemistry quiz . . . (DC)

Dependent Marker Word (DM)

A dependent marker word is a word added to the beginning of an independent clause that makes it into a dependent clause.

Example: When Jim studied in the Sweet Shop for his chemistry quiz, it was very noisy. (DM)

Some common dependent markers are: *after, although, as, as if, because, before, even if, even though, if, in order to, since, though, unless, until, whatever, when, whenever, whether, and while*.

Connecting dependent and independent clauses

There are two types of words that can be used as connectors at the beginning of an independent clause: coordinating conjunctions and independent marker words.

1. Coordinating Conjunction (CC)

The seven coordinating conjunctions used as connecting words at the beginning of an independent clause are *and, but, for, or, nor, so, and yet*. When the second independent clause in a sentence begins with a coordinating conjunction, a comma is needed before the coordinating conjunction:

Example: Jim studied in the Sweet Shop for his chemistry quiz, but it was hard to concentrate because of the noise. (CC)

2. Independent Marker Word (IM)

An independent marker word is a connecting word used at the beginning of an independent clause. These words can always begin a sentence that can stand alone. When the second independent clause in a sentence has an independent marker word, a semicolon is needed before the independent marker word.

Example: Jim studied in the Sweet Shop for his chemistry quiz; however, it was hard to concentrate because of the noise. (IM)

Some common independent markers are: *also, consequently, furthermore, however, moreover, nevertheless, and therefore*.

Proper Punctuation Methods

This table gives some examples of ways to combine independent and dependent clauses and shows how to punctuate them properly.

IC, IC.	I went to the store. I didn't buy any bread.
IC; IC.	I went to the store; I didn't buy any bread.
IC, CC IC.	I went to the store, but I didn't buy any bread.
IC; IM, IC.	I went to the store; however, I didn't buy any bread.
DC, IC.	When I went to the store, I didn't buy any bread.
IC DC.	I didn't buy any bread when I went to the store.

Some Common Errors to Avoid

Comma Splices

A comma splice is the use of a comma between two independent clauses. You can usually fix the error by changing the comma to a period and therefore making the two clauses into two separate sentences, by changing the comma to a semicolon, or by making one clause dependent by inserting a dependent marker word in front of it.

Incorrect: ~~I like this class, it is very interesting.~~

Correct: I like this class. It is very interesting.

(or) I like this class; it is very interesting.

(or) I like this class and it is very interesting.

(or) I like this class because it is very interesting.

(or) Because it is very interesting, I like this class.

Fused Sentences

Fused sentences happen when there are two independent clauses not separated by any form of punctuation. This error is also known as a **run-on sentence**. The error can sometimes be corrected by adding a period, semicolon, or colon to separate the two sentences.

Incorrect: ~~My professor is intelligent I've learned a lot from her.~~

Correct: My professor is intelligent. I've learned a lot from her.

(or) My professor is intelligent; I've learned a lot from her.

(or) My professor is intelligent and I've learned a lot from her.

(or) My professor is intelligent; moreover, I've learned a lot from her.

Sentence Fragments

Sentence fragments happen by treating a dependent clause or other incomplete thought as a complete sentence. You can usually fix this error by combining it with another sentence to make a complete thought or by removing the dependent marker.

Incorrect: ~~Because I forgot the exam was today.~~

Correct: Because I forgot the exam was today, I didn't study.

(or) I forgot the exam was today.

Related Materials on OWL

Run-Ons, Comma Splices, Fused Sentences (http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_sentpr.html)

Sentence Variety (http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_sentvar.html)

Using Commas (http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_comma.html)

The following information must remain intact on every handout printed for distribution.

This page is located at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/grammar/g_clause.html

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