



The Writing Center

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO
DENVER | ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS

The Basics of Syntax: Independent Clauses

To compose well-structured, properly punctuated sentences, writers should recognize and understand the key building blocks of sentences: clauses. Clauses come in two forms, independent and dependent. This handout will examine independent clauses, focusing particularly on the elements they're composed of—subjects and verbs—and how to effectively use independent clauses to create dynamic and interesting sentences.

Subjects

All clauses have a subject—the person, thing, concept, or idea that is doing or being something. Subjects are always nouns, pronouns, or noun phrases. Some examples include:

- Nouns: researchers, Sarah, roads
- Pronouns: she, it, they
- Noun phrases: the researchers, Sarah and her sister, the narrow British country roads and countless side streets

Notice that noun phrases are made up of multiple words describing the person, thing, idea, or concept; they may also consist of multiple people, ideas, things, or concepts. There can also be more nouns, pronouns, and noun phrases in a sentence than those acting as the subject. So to identify the noun/noun phrase/pronoun that is the subject of the clause, ask a simple question: “Who or what is doing or being something in this sentence?” Try it out with the following sentence:

The researchers have tested for alkaline in the water.

The answer is “the researchers”—they have tested for alkaline in the water.

Verbs

Accompanying the subject is a verb—the word or words that bring life to a clause. These can convey:

- Actions: run, eat, dance
- Sentiments: love, fear, hate
- Thought processes: ponder, realize, know
- Possession: own, have
- States of existence: be, seem, appear

Just like subjects, verbs can also be made up of multiple actions or states of being or other words describing the actions or states of being. These collections of words are called verb phrases and include the verb + any direct or indirect objects that follow the verb (nouns and noun phrases not acting as subjects). Prepositional phrases and adverbs are also common elements of verb phrases. To illustrate, in the following independent clauses, the underlined portions are all verb phrases:

- The researchers have tested for alkaline in the water.
- She intensely and passionately loved her family.
- The narrow British country roads and countless side streets disoriented and confused the American driver.

To identify the verb in a clause, ask another question: “What is the subject doing or being in the sentence?” Return to the first sample sentence:

The researchers have tested for alkaline in the water.

The answer is “have tested”—the researchers have tested for alkaline in the water.

Composing with Independent Clauses

After recognizing an independent clause, writers can then use those clauses to construct sentences. Sentences made up of only independent clauses take two forms: simple and compound.

Simple Sentences

When a sentence is composed of just one independent clause, it is called a simple sentence. The following sentences, which consist of only one noun phrase and one verb phrase, are examples of simple sentences:

The researchers have tested for alkaline in the water.

The student advisory board did not organize or plan any activities this year.

The narrow British country roads and countless side streets disoriented and confused the American driver.

Notice that in the second and third examples above, simple coordination is used to join like parts (verb + verb; noun + noun) within a single independent clause.

Writers can string together multiple simple sentences by separating the independent clauses with a period, which conveys a hard, definite break between ideas:

The test revealed malignant tumor cells. The attending physician scheduled the patient for surgery.

Compound Sentences

If writers want to do more than string together simple sentences with periods, they can join independent clauses with two types of connectors—semicolons or commas (with coordinating conjunctions)—to create compound sentences. Writers can use each option to achieve various effects.

- Semicolons:

The semicolon is a softer, less definite break between ideas. Writers opt for a semicolon to demonstrate that the ideas in each independent clause are closely related.

The test revealed malignant tumor cells; the attending physician scheduled the patient for surgery.

- **Commas with Coordinating Conjunctions:**
If two independent clauses are closely related but writers want to specify that relationship, then connecting independent clauses with a comma and a coordinating conjunction might be the better choice. As the diagram shows, each conjunction conveys a different meaning. For example:

The test revealed malignant tumor cells, **so** the attending physician scheduled the patient for surgery.

This coordinating conjunction implies that the second independent clause is an effect or result of the first independent clause. But a different coordinating conjunction changes the meaning:

The test revealed malignant tumor cells, **and** the attending physician scheduled the patient for surgery.

Here, the coordinating conjunction implies that the second independent clause is additional to the first independent clause; the ideas in both are balanced. Either option is grammatically correct, but it's up to writers to choose which meaning is best.

Avoiding Common Errors: Fused Sentences

One common problem writers face when joining multiple independent clauses is omitting or improperly using the connector, the result of which is called a fused (or, colloquially, a run-on) sentence.

- Example of a fused sentence with an omitted connector:
The test revealed malignant tumor cells the attending physician scheduled the patient for surgery.
- Example of a fused sentence with an improperly used connector:
The test revealed malignant tumor cells so the attending physician scheduled the patient for surgery.

Notice that even though a coordinating conjunction was used in the second example, there's no comma, which is required when using coordinating conjunctions to create compound sentences.

One last note: using a comma alone (with no coordinating conjunction) to connect independent clauses causes a different error known as a comma splice. For more on this issue, please consult the Comma Splice handout.

Coordinating Conjunctions	
F	BOYS
For - cause	
And - balance/addition	
Nor - choice/option/alternative	
But - contrast/opposition	
Or - contrast/alternative	
Yet - contrast/concession	
So - effect/result	