Mark Morton's Quick and Dirty Guide to Sentence Structure

Subjects, Verbs, and Objects.

All sentences contain at least two elements: an action, and somebody or something doing that action. The action is referred to as the finite verb. The person or thing doing the action is called the subject.

> *The dog barked.*

In the above sentence, the person or thing doing the action is the dog, so "dog" is the subject; the action being done is the barking, so "barked" is the finite verb.

Many sentences also have a third element, namely, somebody or something that is having the action done to them – that is, they are not doing the action, but rather they are receiving the action. The person or thing that has the action done to them is called the direct object.

> *The dog bit the man.*

In the above sentence, the person or thing doing the action is the dog (so "dog" is the subject), the action is that of biting (so "bit" is the finite verb), and the person or thing which is receiving the action is the man (so "man" is the direct object).

What this means is that all sentences must contain at least one subject and at least one finite verb; many sentences will also contain a direct object, but they don't have to. Of course the other thing about sentences is that they have to be able to stand on their own.

Clauses

So far, I've been using the word "sentence" to talk about the "thing" in which subjects, finite verbs, and direct objects appear, because "sentence" is a common, easy word. However, in order to really know what a sentence is, you have to know two other terms: clause and phrase. Sentences are made out of clauses and phrases.

Let's start by defining a clause: a clause is meaningful sequence of words that contains a subject and a finite verb. Obviously, this definition of a clause makes it very similar to what a sentence is; the difference, however, is that a single sentence may be made up of many clauses; as well, some clauses can stand on their own as sentences, but other sorts of clauses cannot. Here are some comparisons of clauses and sentences:

> *The dog barked.*

The above sentence is, as I said previously, a real sentence, and it also happens to be a clause (it's a clause because it has a subject ("dog") and a finite verb ("barked").

Although the dog barked.

The above statement is obviously not a sentence (because it can't stand on it's own), but it IS a clause (it still has a subject – "dog" – and it still has a finite verb – "barked").

Although the dog barked, I slept all night.

The above sentence is a real sentence, but it contains not one, but two, clauses; the subject of the first clause is "dog" and the finite verb of the first clause is "barked"; the subject of the second clause is "I" and the finite verb of the second clause is "slept."

So just remember that sentences and clauses are closely related, but that one sentence may be made up of several clauses (or, to put it another way, a sentence may contain just one clause, or it may contain a dozen clauses).

Joining clauses together in a sentence

If a sentence contains several clauses, then those clauses must be joined to each other in one of three different ways: either with a semi-colon, or with a relative pronoun, or with a conjunction.

1. **Semi-colons**. Semi-colons look like this – **;** – and they go between the two clauses that are to be joined:

The dog barked; the cat meowed. (These two clauses are joined by the semi-colon.)

2. **Relative pronouns**. There are only three relative pronouns: "who," "which," and "that." These relative pronouns join clauses, and when they do they may also function as the subject of the second clause:

I cursed the dog THAT howled all night. (In this sentence the first clause is "I cursed the dog"; in the first clause "I" is the subject, "cursed" is the finite verb, and "dog" is the direct object." The second clause is "that howled all night"; in the second clause, the relative pronoun "that" functions as the subject, and "howled" is the finite verb. It is also the relative pronoun "that" which joins the two clauses).

I cursed my brother, WHO owned the dog. ("Who" is both the subject of the second clause, and the relative pronoun that joins the two clauses).

I bought the dog, WHICH I began to grow fond of. (In this case, "which" doesn't function as the subject of the second clause, but it still joins the two clauses).

3. **Conjunctions**. Conjunctions are complicated and difficult to understand because there are two kinds of conjunctions, and because they may be confused with conjunctive adverbs (but in reality conjunctions are very different from conjunctive adverbs).

The first kind of conjunction is called the coordinate conjunction. Here's a list of all of them:

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

The second kind of conjunction is called the subordinate conjunction. Here's a list of the more common ones:

after, although, as, as if, as long as, as though, because, before, how, if, in order that, provided that, since, so, so that, though, till, unless, until, what, whatever, when, whenever, where, wherever, while.

Here's an example of two clauses joined by a coordinate conjunction:

The dog howled AND I growled.

Here's an example of two clauses joined by a subordinate conjunction:

The dog stopped howling AFTER I fed it.

So, what's the difference between coordinate conjunctions and subordinate conjunctions? There are a couple of things.

First, if a clause begins with a subordinate conjunction (as in "AFTER I poisoned it," then that clause can never stand on its own; that is, a clause that begins with a subordinate conjunction MUST be joined to another clause that CAN stand on its own. In contrast – and this may defy everything you've heard before from high school teachers, so hang on to your hat – a clause that begins with a coordinate conjunction can, if you want it to, stand on its own. This means that "and I growled" could be made into a real sentence simply by capitalizing the first letter: "And I growled." By the way, a clause that begins with a coordinate conjunction is called an independent clause (because it can stand on its own); a clause that begins with a subordinate conjunction is called a dependent clause (or you can also call it a subordinate clause).

Another difference between coordinate conjunctions and subordinate conjunctions is this: when you use a coordinate conjunction to join two clauses, the coordinate conjunction must go BETWEEN the two clauses: "The dog howled AND I growled." (Or maybe a more accurate way of saying the same thing is this: the clause that begins with the coordinate conjunction must be the second of the two joined clauses). In contrast, when you use a subordinate conjunction to join two clauses, you have a choice: you can put the clause that begins with the subordinate conjunction either before or after the other clause. For example, you can write this:

The dog stopped howling AFTER I fed it.

Or you can write this:

AFTER I fed it, the dog stopped howling.

Note, and never forget, that in the above sentence, it is the subordinate conjunction "after" that joins the two clauses, even though it's not placed in the middle of the sentence. You might think that it's the comma that joins the two clauses, but it's not. The comma merely helps out, by showing where one clause ends and the next begins; in other words, the comma does NOT join the clauses.

Conjunctive Adverbs

Just as whipping cream resembles shaving cream, conjunctions resemble conjunctive adverbs – nonetheless, you must not confuse them, or you end up making atrocious errors. To understand what a conjunctive adverb is, you must first understand what an adverb is. Simply put, an adverb modifies some other word or phrase in a sentence – that is, it tells you more about that other word or phrase. Here's an example, in which the word "quickly" is the adverb:

The cat quickly ran down the road.

The thing about adverbs is that they are slippery: they can slide into all kinds of different places in a sentence. For example, in addition to the above sentence, you can also write these versions:

Quickly, the cat ran down the road.

The cat ran quickly down the road.

The cat ran down the road quickly.

The same is true of conjunctive adverbs: they can slide around a sentence, so you can choose to put them wherever they fit best. Here's an example, using one of the most common conjunctive adverbs, the word "however":

Feeding the dog made it happy; however, perhaps I overfed it.

Feeding the dog made it happy; perhaps, however, I overfed it.

Feeding the dog made it happy; perhaps I overfed it, however.

(Incidentally, note that you can't move conjunctions around a sentence in the same way: conjunctions, whether they are coordinate or subordinate, must be at the VERY BEGINNING of

either the first or second of the two clauses that are being joined. Thus, you can write this sentence: "Feeding the dog made the nights quieter, BUT maybe I overfed it." But you can't put the word "but" anywhere else in that clause – for example, you can't write "Feeding the dog made the nights quieter, perhaps BUT I overfed.")

So remember this: conjunctive adverbs may resemble conjunctions but they are nonetheless quite different. Conjunctions can join clauses, but conjunctive adverbs cannot (conjunctive adverbs can HELP to join clauses, but only if a semi-colon first does the real work of joining them – thus, the following statement is not a real sentence: "I am happy however he is sad." To make this into a real sentence, you have to first join the two clauses with a semi-colon: "I am happy; he is sad." Having added the semi-colon, you can then add a conjunctive adverb if you want to: "I am happy; however, he is sad." Alternatively, you could change the sentence more radically by using a conjunction (instead of using a semi-colon and a conjunctive adverb): "I am happy, but he is sad."

Here is a list of the more common conjunctive adverbs:

> *as a result, besides, consequently, even so, for example, however, likewise, nevertheless, nonetheless, on the contrary, on the other hand, similarly, still, therefore, thus, indeed.*

Phrases

You now know what a clause is (a meaningful sequence of words that contains a subject and a finite verb). But another term that you need to know in order to understand sentences is the word "phrase." Essentially, a phrase is a meaningful sequence of words that does not contain a subject and a finite verb. For example, these are phrases:

- *from the car*
- *to scream loudly*
- *running down the street*

Phrases cannot stand on their own, so they have to be attached to something else in a sentence. For example:

- *I ran from the car.*
- *I began to scream loudly.*
- *I went running down the street.*

There are many different kinds of phrases, but the most common is the prepositional phrase. A prepositional phrase is one that begins with a preposition. Prepositions are words that help to describe how something was done or how something looked. They include the following.

with, up, over, from, down, beside, in, out, of, in front of, through, away from, next to, along side, on, to.

Instead of memorizing the dozens of prepositions in English, you could just memorize this sentence: "I ran _____ the car." Any word that fits into the blank – such as "I ran OVER the car" – will be a preposition (the only preposition this doesn't work with is "of," so you just have to remember that "of" is a preposition). Being able to identify prepositions is helpful because you can then identify prepositional phrases; in turn, being able to identify prepositional phrases is helpful because once you've identified them you can ignore them; and once you ignore them, then the remainder of the sentence will be the "essence" of the sentence, and you'll more easily be able to spot errors or weaknesses that it contains.

Final notes, remarks, and things I've forgotten

The two most common and serious errors in writing sentences are comma-splices and sentence fragments.

Comma splices are where you try to join two clauses by using just a comma, which you cannot do; to really join clauses you must, as you now know, use either a semi-colon, a relative pronoun, or a conjunction.

Sentence fragments are where you try to make something stand on its own as a sentence when it really isn't a sentence. There's two ways of making this error.

First, you might be trying to make a phrase stand on its own, as with "To the moon" (there's no subject or finite verb here, so it can't possibly stand on its own).

Second, you might be trying to make a subordinate clause stand on its own (that is, a clause that begins with a subordinate conjunction). For instance, this is a sentence fragment: "Although the weather is warm in the summer." This clause does indeed contain a subject – "weather" – and also contains a finite verb – "is" – but it's made into a subordinate clause by the fact that it begins with the subordinate conjunction "although."

I mentioned earlier that commas cannot be used to join clauses. But is there anything that commas CAN join? The answer is yes: commas can be used to join a clause to a phrase, or a phrase to a clause, or even a phrase to a phrase. For example, consider this sentence:

Having finally fallen asleep, I was irritated when I was awakened by the neighbour's dog.

In the above sentence, the part before the comma is a phrase, and the part after the comma is a clause; the comma is what joins them. Here's another example:

Throughout the night, I was kept awake by the sound of my own heart beating.

In the above sentence, the comma joins a phrase (the part before the comma), to a clause (the part after the comma).

Finally, a couple more things about finite verbs. Understanding what a finite verb really is can be made much easier if you contrast it with what it isn't: finite verbs are not infinitives and they are not participles.

An infinitive is a verb form that begins with "to": for example, "to run," "to jump," "to sleep." They are called infinitives because they have not been made finite – that is, they have not been "limited" to a particular subject and tense (after all, if I say "to run" and then ask you WHO is doing the running, you can't tell; likewise, if I say "to run" and then ask you WHEN the running is happening, you also can't tell). An infinitive becomes a finite verb when you LIMIT it to a particular subject ("he runs" – Who is running? "He" is. When is the running occurring? Right now, in the present).

Participles are also forms of verbs. English has two sorts or participles: present participles (which end in "ing" as in "jumping") and past participles (which usually end in "ed" or "t" as in "jumped" or "wept"). Participles are not finite verbs, and thus they cannot – at least not by themselves – be used with a subject. For example, you can't write "He jumping." You could, however, add a finite verb to that statement and then it would be correct: "He enjoys jumping" or "He is jumping."