

Basic Grammatical Parts

BUILDING SENTENCES: BASIC GRAMMATICAL PARTS

Understanding basic grammatical parts can help you improve your use of grammar. Likewise, improving your grammar will help you express your ideas clearly and fluidly.

Phrases and Clauses, Oh My!

Let's start with two basic word groupings: phrases and clauses. A clause has a complete sentence core with a subject and a verb, while a phrase is a word group that lacks a subject, verb, or both.

Phrase: Daring him to walk across the street.

Clause: He walked across the street.

Types of Clauses: Independent and Dependent

A clause includes a subject and a verb, but not all clauses can stand alone. For example, one sentence below is an independent clause, and one is a dependent clause (also called a subordinate clause). Dependent (subordinate) clauses start with a subordinating conjunction, such as because, though, since, although, before, once, and when. See Hacker page 309 for a complete list.

Independent Clause: The rats invaded my sister's basement last winter.

Dependent Clause: While Sarah loved listening to the rain hit the roof of her tent.

Connecting Phrases and Clauses

Commas, along with other punctuation marks, "control" the phrases and clauses so that they communicate exactly what the speaker/writer intends. To actualize the intended meaning of a sentence, familiarize yourself with the various comma rules.

Commas connect and control independent and dependent clauses. When a dependent clause is placed at the beginning of the sentence, a comma is needed between the dependent and independent clauses.

Connecting Dependent Clauses to Independent Clauses

In the sentences below, commas are placed after the dependent clauses. The word that helps identify the clause as dependent (the subordinating conjunction) is underlined.

While some penguins have evolved to tolerate arctic conditions, others inhabit the warm waters of California.

The talk show reported that though awareness efforts about domestic abuse are increasing, many women feel abandoned.

Connecting Two Independent Clauses with a Coordinating Conjunction:

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Memorize coordinating conjunctions with the acronym FANBOYS (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). This list can be found in Hacker 304. The coordinating conjunctions are underlined in the sentences below.

The people around him were very excited, yet he was about to suffer a nervous breakdown.

Alligators run rampant near my grandmother's condo in Florida, so I refuse to wear flip-flops.

Notice the comma placement above. The comma shows the reader that there are two independent clauses and that both of these clauses deserve equal attention to derive the full meaning of the sentence.

Connecting Introductory Clauses and Phrases to Introductory Clauses.

The sentences below require commas between the introductory clauses and phrases and the independent clause. The introductory clauses and phrases are underlined. See the "Varying Sentence Structure" handout for more information about introductory clauses and phrases.

After many hours in the emergency room, the mother took the daughter home.

Near his favorite store on Michigan Avenue, he saw a tourist being pick-pocketed.

Wherein her mother was distant, her mother-in-law was obnoxiously nose.

Identifying and Marking Nonrestrictive Elements

Restrictive and nonrestrictive elements differ in that "A restrictive element defines or limits the meaning of the word it modifies; it is therefore essential to the meaning of the sentence and is not set off with commas. A nonrestrictive element describes a word whose meaning already is clear. Because it is not essential to the meaning of the sentence, it is set off with commas" (Hacker 57).

To maintain a sentence's clarity, nonrestrictive elements should be marked with commas. As interrupters are not an integral part of a sentence, they should be surrounded by commas to signal to the reader that this is auxiliary information. The nonrestrictive elements are underlined below.

Geraldine, a very well-intentioned and kind woman, drove my grandmother nuts.

The bed and breakfast in Door County, decorated with artifacts true to its history, is my mother's favorite getaway.