To write well, you need to understand how to form sentences. Parts of speech are the building blocks of sentences. Parts of speech are combined to form phrases. Phrases are in turn combined to form clauses, which are combined to form sentences. This handout will orient you to the different parts of speech.

Note: For this handout we have chosen to follow The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language since it is the most comprehensive and up-to-date source available. Some of the vocabulary and terms may be different than those you were taught previously.

Traditional Classifications

When you learned grammar in school, you probably learned about two clause types: independent and dependent.

**Independent Clause**
These are clauses that can stand on their own. They have a subject (usually a noun phrase) and a predicate (the part of the clause that says something about the subject, often the main verb) and express a complete thought.

**Example:** The cat ate the mouse.

**Dependent Clause**
These are clauses that can't stand on their own. While they may have a subject and a predicate, something else—like a subordinating conjunction—prevents the clause from expressing a complete thought.

**Example:** Although the cat ate the mouse

**Further Classification**
Linguists have additional categories for analyzing clauses, which are presented in the rest of this handout. **Main clauses** correspond to independent clauses. Dependent clauses are classified as **subordinate clauses**, with special subcategories: **content clauses, relative clauses, comparative clauses**, and **non-finite clauses**.

**Clause Type vs. Sentence Type**
Traditional grammar lists four types of sentences: declarative, interrogative, imperative, and exclamative. Really, these are categories of clauses, not sentences. This is most evident in sentences that contain clauses of varying types.

**Example:** Sally walked the cat, but did you go with her?
Main Clauses

Main clauses are not embedded in other clauses—they stand on their own.

**Declarative Clauses**

Declarative clauses make statements. They are the most common clause type.

**Example:** The cat went inside the house.

*Note:* For a detailed discussion of declarative clause structure, please see our “Basic Clause Structure” and “Advanced Clause Structure” handouts.

**Closed-interrogative Clauses**

Closed-interrogative clauses are used to ask questions that anticipate a closed or fixed set of answers (e.g., “yes” or “no”).

**Example:** Did the cat go inside the house?

Closed-interrogatives contain auxiliary verbs (e.g., “did,” “have,” etc.), which swap positions with the subject of the clause. This swapping is called **inversion**.

**Declarative Version (Not Inverted):** The cat **has** gone inside.

**Closed-interrogative Version (Inverted):** Has the cat ____ gone inside?

**Open-interrogative Clauses**

Open-interrogative clauses ask open-ended questions. In other words, they do not anticipate a specific set of answers. They are introduced by question words such as “who,” “what,” “when,” “where,” “why,” and “how.”

**Example:** Who let out the cat?

Question words can replace or modify different parts of the clause, such as subjects, objects, complements, etc.

**Declarative Version (Subject):** He **let out the cat.**

**Open-interrogative Version (Subject):** Who **let out the cat?**

**Declarative Version (Object):** He found **it** in the litter box.

**Open-interrogative Version (Object):** He found **what** in the litter box?

If the question word replaces or modifies a non-subject, that element can move to the front of the clause. In other words, the element can be **fronted.** When this happens, the verb in the clause adds an auxiliary like “do” or “has.” The auxiliary and the subject then invert. Remember auxiliaries inflect for tense.

**Step 1: Fronted Object:** What **he found ____** in the litter box.

**Step 2: Inverted Subject and Auxiliary:** What **did he ____ find** in the litter box?
Imperative Clauses

Imperative clauses are used to make commands and requests or to give instructions and advice. The subject of an imperative clause is usually “you,” which is often left implied. Verbs in imperative clauses take the plain form.

**Declarative Version:** You went inside with the cat.
**Imperative Version:** Go inside with the cat.

*Note:* For more information on the plain form, please see our “Verbs” handout.

Words like “somebody,” “anybody,” and “everybody,” can also function as the subject of an imperative clause.

**Example:** Somebody help me find the cat.

When expressing negation, imperative clauses use the auxiliaries “do” and “not” (often contracted to “don’t”).

**Example:** Do not pet the cat.
**Example:** Don’t be so mean to the cat.

“Let’s” (a contraction of “let us”) can also be used to make commands in the first person.

**Example:** Let’s be more careful next time.
**Example:** Let’s go to the pet store.

Exclamative Clauses

Exclamative clauses express a strong emotion. They begin with either “what” or “how.”

**Example:** What big eyes she has!
**Example:** How she has grown!

The phrase containing “what” or “how” can either be a subject or a non-subject (e.g., predicative complement or object). No subjects will be fronted.

**Subject:** What frisky cats live in this apartment!

**Object (Fronted):** What a nose she has _____!
**Object in Analogous Declarative Clause:** She has a nose.

**Predicative Complement (Fronted):** How cute you are _____!
**Predicative Complement in Analogous Declarative Clause:** You are cute.

Content Clauses

Content clauses are a type of **subordinate clause.** They cannot stand on their own and are embedded in main clauses. Content clauses are primarily used as complements.

**Declarative Content Clauses**

Declarative content clauses are usually introduced by “that.” However, “that” can sometimes be omitted.
Clause: that the cat went inside the house
Clause in Larger Sentence: I told him that the cat went inside the house.
Clause in Larger Sentence ("That" Omitted): I told him the cat went inside the house.

Closed-interrogative Content Clauses
Closed-interrogative content clauses are like regular closed interrogative clauses in that they anticipate a fixed set of answers, such as “yes” or “no.” They are introduced with “if” or “whether.” Unlike their regular clause counterparts, these content clauses do not invert.

Clause: if the cat is inside the house
Clause in Larger Sentence: I don’t know if the cat is inside the house.

Open-interrogative Content Clauses
Open-interrogative content clauses correspond to open-ended questions. They don’t anticipate a particular answer. They are introduced with question words like “who,” “where,” “when,” etc.

Clause: where the cat is
Clause in Larger Sentence: I don’t know where the cat is.

Exclamative content clauses, like their regular clause counterparts, begin with “how” or “what” and front the predicative complement.

Clause: what a cute cat she is
Clause in Larger Sentence: She told him what a cute cat she is.

Relative Clauses
Relative clauses are special subordinate clauses that modify nouns. For this reason, some grammarians call them adjective clauses.

Noun: cats
Noun Modified by Relative Clause: cats that eat too many mice

Structure of Relative Clauses
Remember, a relative clause—just like any other clause—has its own structure, complete with subjects, objects, etc.

Declarative Version (subject/verb/object): People own cats.
Relative Version (subject/verb/object): who own cats

The relative element in the clause can be any number of things: subject, object, complement of a preposition, modifier of a verb, etc. Regardless of which element is relativized, it will be fronted to the beginning of the relative clause.

Subject: people who adopt kittens
Declarative Equivalent: People adopt kittens.

Object (Fronted): pets that people adopt
Declarative Equivalent: People adopt pets.
Complement of Preposition (Fronted): the pound, [from which you can adopt a pet ___]
Declarative Equivalent: You can adopt from a pet from the pound.

Modifier of Verb (Fronted): a place [where cats like to sleep ___]
Declarative Equivalent: Cats like to sleep there.

When a relative clause is the complement of a preposition, you have a choice to front the preposition along with the clause.

Complement of Preposition (Preposition Fronted): the cat, [to which you gave the food ___]
Complement of Preposition (Preposition Not Fronted): the cat, [which you gave the food to]

While you may have heard that you should always front your prepositions (i.e., “Never end a sentence with a preposition!”), leaving a preposition at the end of a sentence is perfectly grammatical. However, it may sound less formal. Front your prepositions if you want to sound as formal as possible.

Less Formal: the man [who you gave the kitten to]
More Formal: the man [to whom you gave the kitten]

Note: You must always use “whom” with a fronted preposition. You cannot say “to who.”

Relative Words
This section details the different words used to introduce relative clauses. The next section will detail when to use them.

Some relative clauses begin with a “wh-” word such as “who,” “whose,” “which,” “where,” “when,” or “why.”

Who: people who own cats
Whose: the man whose cats roam freely
Which: cats, which are mammals.
Where: a place where cats like to sleep
When: the day when we adopted the kitten
Why: the reason why we adopt cats

Other relative clauses begin with “that.”

That: cats that eat too much

Some relative clauses do not use a relative word at all. These are called bare relative clauses.

Bare Relative Clause (NP in Brackets): Give the cat [the food you bought].
Regular Relative Clause (NP in Brackets): Give the cat [the food that you bought].

However, you can’t have a bare relative clause if the relative element is the subject in the relative clause. The relative element has to be an object, complement, or modifier within the relative clause.

Subject (Ungrammatical): people who adopt kittens
Object: pets that people own
Complement of Preposition: the pound that I went to
Modifier of Verb: a place where cats like to visit
Remember to use “who” for relative elements that are subjects and “whom” for objects or complements.

**Relative Element is Subject:** people [who adopt kittens]

**Relative Element is Object:** people [whom we interviewed]

## Integrated (Restrictive) and Supplemental (Non-restrictive) Relative Clauses

**Integrated relative clauses** (sometimes called restrictive clauses) are integrated into the noun phrase—you cannot remove them without altering the meaning of the phrase. Since they are integrated, they are not marked by punctuation such as commas.

**Integrated Relative Clause (NP in Brackets):** Out of all of our cats, [only the cats that ate the salsa] are sick.

**Integrated Relative Clause Removed (NP in Brackets):** Out of all of our cats, [only the cats] are sick.

**Supplemental relative clauses** (non-restrictive) provide supplemental information. They can be removed without altering the meaning of the noun phrase. These relative clauses are set off by commas. Think of the commas as handles—you can use them to lift out the supplemental clause.

**Supplemental Relative Clause (NP in Brackets):** [The movie, which stars Adam Sandler,] was a flop.

**Supplemental Relative Clause Removed (NP in Brackets):** [The movie] was a flop.

You may have learned to use “that” with integrated relatives, “which” with supplemental relatives, and “who” with relatives modifying nouns that signify people. While this is generally what readers expect to see, a more detailed explanation of when to specific relative words with clauses can be found in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relative Words</th>
<th>“Which”</th>
<th>“Why”</th>
<th>Other “Wh-”</th>
<th>“That”</th>
<th>Bare</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplemental</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consider the following examples:

**“Which” Integrated (Incorrect):** [Our cats which sleep all day] are playful at night.

**“Which” Supplemental:** [Our cats, which sleep all day] are playful at night.

**“Why” Integrated:** [The reason why the cats sleep all day] is unknown.

**“Why” Supplemental (Incorrect):** [The reason, why the cats sleep all day] is unknown.

**Other “Wh-” Integrated:** [People who own pets] should clean up after them.

**Other “Wh-” Supplemental:** [John, who lives down the hall] does not clean up after his cat.

**“That” Integrated:** [The cats that we adopted] are cuter than our other cats.

**“That” Supplemental (Incorrect):** [The cats, that we adopted] are cuter than our other cats.

**Bare Integrated:** [The food we bought] was expensive.

**Bare Supplemental (Incorrect):** [The food, we bought] is expensive.

## Fused Relatives

Sometimes the relative word fuses with the head of the noun phrase. When this happens, the phrase
becomes a fused relative.

**Unfused Relative Clause:** [A person who owns a pet] needs to be responsible.

**Fused Relative Clause:** [Whoever owns a pet] needs to be responsible.

Common relative words in fused relatives include “who/whoever,” “what/whatever,” “which/whichever,” “where/wherever,” and “when/whenever.”

**Comparative Clauses**

Comparative clauses are subordinate clauses used in comparisons. They are introduced by the prepositions such as “than,” “as,” or “like.” Structurally, comparative clauses omit many words that are given in the first part of the comparison, a process called reduction.

**Comparative Clause:** Our cat can run faster than your cat can run.

**Comparative Clause (Reduced):** Our cat can run faster than your cat.

**Comparative Clause:** My kitten is not as cute as your kitten is cute.

**Comparative Clause (Reduced):** My kitten is not as cute as your kitten.

**Comparative Clause:** She walks like a cat walks.

**Comparative Clause (Reduced):** She walks like a cat.

**Non-finite Clauses**

Non-finite clauses are subordinate clauses that contain a non-finite form of a verb, such as the plain form, gerund-participle, or past participle.

Plain Form (Bare Infinitival): feed the cat

Plain Form ("To" Infinitival): to feed the cat

Gerund-participle: feeding the cat

Past Participle: fed the cat

Note: For more information on verb forms, please see our “Verbs” handout.

**Bare Infinitival**

Bare infinitivals are mostly used as complements of certain verbs. They do not include subjects.

Example: You should feed the cat.
Example: All he had to do was feed the cat.

**“To” Infinitival**

“To” infinitivals have a range of functions, including subject; object; complement of verbs, nouns, prepositions, and adjectives; and modifiers of verbs and nouns.

However, when used as subjects or objects, these clauses are usually moved within the clause or extraposed. In these cases, “it” occupies the initial position of the element in the clause.

Step 1: Extraposed Subject: _____ can be expensive to own a cat.

Step 2: Dummy Subject “It”: It can be expensive to own a cat.
Subject: To feed a cat is easy.
Subject (Extraposed): It is easy to feed a cat.
Object (Extraposed): I find it hard to concentrate with that cat around.
Complement of Verb: I need to find a cat-sitter.
Modifier of Verb: I take my cat on walks to keep her healthy.
Complement of Noun: This is my chance to own a cat.
Modifier of Noun: This is a can to store cat food in.
Complement of Preposition: There is no place for the cat to sleep.
Note: “The cat” is the subject of the non-finite clause. The whole clause is the complement of “for.”
Complement of Adjective: We are happy to watch another cat.
Note: For more information about extraposition, please see our “Advanced Clause Structure” handout.

Gerund-participle
Gerund-participle clauses can serve many of the same functions as “to” infinitivals. These clauses occasionally contain a subject.
Subject: Feeding a cat is easy.
Subject (Extraposed): It has been fun playing with the cat.
Object: I hate cleaning the litter box.
Object (Extraposed): I find it boring cleaning the litter box.
Modifier of Verb: Passing through the park, I see many stray cats.
Modifier of Noun: Did you see the cat sleeping in the store window?
Complement of Preposition: They insisted on the cat sleeping in my bed.
Note: “The cat” is the subject of the non-finite clause. The whole clause is the complement of “on.”

Past Participle
Clauses headed by a past participle are used primarily as modifiers in noun phrases.
Example: cats adopted by children
Example: food eaten during the cat’s stay at the shelter

References