

sentences

Sentences are one of the most basic elements of writing. This handout will help you understand sentence structures and functions and when to use them.

General Info

Clauses

Clauses are the building blocks of sentences. To understand the rest of this handout, you will need to know two types of clauses: independent and dependent.

Independent clauses have both a subject and a verb, express a complete thought, and can stand on their own.

Example: The girl caught the ball.

Dependent clauses cannot stand by themselves—they depend on an independent clause to make sense. Dependent clauses can come at the beginning, middle, or end of an independent clause. Additionally, they usually begin with a subordinating conjunction (e.g., “although,” “if,” “while”) or a relative pronoun (e.g., “who,” “that,” “which”).

Example: Although the girl caught it

Note: This dependent clause does not express a complete thought.

Note: For more information on clauses, please see our [handout](#) on this topic.

Completeness

A complete sentence must have at least one independent clause. Additionally, it must begin with a capital letter and end with either a period, question mark, or exclamation point.

Example: The boy kicked the ball.

Sentence Structures

One way to classify sentences is based on their structure. There are four basic types of sentences.

Simple

Simple sentences contain a single independent clause.



Example: The boy kicked the ball.

Compound

Compound sentences contain two or more simple sentences (i.e., independent clauses). These simple sentences are joined either with a comma and conjunction or with a semicolon.

Example: The boy kicked the ball, and the girl caught it.

Note: “The boy kicked the ball” and “the girl caught it” are both simple sentences (i.e., independent clauses).

Complex

Complex sentences contain a single independent clause and one or more dependent clauses. The dependent clause can come at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of the independent clause.

If the dependent clause comes at the beginning of the independent clause, join the two clauses with a comma.

Example: Although he didn’t want to, the boy kicked the ball.

Note: The dependent clause, “although he didn’t want to,” comes at the beginning of the independent clause, “the boy kicked the ball.”

If the dependent clause comes in the middle of the independent clause, your choice to set the dependent clause off with commas will depend on whether it is **restrictive** or **non-restrictive**.

Non-restrictive Dependent Clause: The boy, who didn’t want to play, kicked the ball.

Note: The dependent clause, “who didn’t want to play,” comes in the middle of the independent clause, “the boy kicked the ball.” Since it is non-restrictive, it is set off by commas. It could be removed if necessary.

Restrictive Dependent Clause: The boy who didn’t want to play kicked the ball.

Note: The dependent clause, “who didn’t want to play,” comes in the middle of the independent clause, “the boy kicked the ball.” Since it is restrictive, it is not set off by commas. It could not be removed as it’s being used to indicate which specific boy is being referred to.

Note: For more information on restrictive and non-restrictive clauses, please see our “Clauses” [handout](#).

If the dependent clause comes at the end of the independent clause, you do not need to use a comma to join them unless you want to emphasize the contrast between ideas expressed by the two clauses.

Example: The boy kicked the ball, although he didn’t want to.

Note: The dependent clause, “although he didn’t want to,” comes at the end of the independent clause, “the boy kicked the ball.”

Compound-complex

Compound-complex sentences contain two independent clauses and at least one dependent clause. Imagine it as adding a simple sentence to a complex sentence.

Example: Although he didn’t want to, the boy kicked the ball, and the girl caught it.

Note: “Although he didn’t want to, the boy kicked the ball” is a complex sentence with a dependent and an

independent clause. "The girl caught it" is a simple sentence joined to the complex sentence with a comma and conjunction.

Sentence Functions

Another way to classify sentences is based on their function. Sentences have four basic functions.

Declarative

Declarative sentences make a statement and provide information.

Example: The boy kicked the ball.

Interrogative

Interrogative sentences ask a question.

Example: Did the boy kick the ball?

Imperative

Imperative sentences issue a command. The subject ("you") is often implied.

Example: Kick the ball.

Exclamatory

Exclamatory sentences express sudden emotion.

Example: Oh how the boy kicked the ball!

References

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