Independent and Dependent Clauses

Why learn about a seemingly obscure grammatical principle such as the clause? A detailed understanding of clauses and their function in a sentence allows us to punctuate correctly and understand why we are punctuating in certain ways. We can also better understand how to use words (conjunctions, adverbs) to show the connections between ideas and sentences.

Definitions

A. A clause is defined as any group of words that contains a subject and a predicate (verb).

> **Example:** If the <u>sky</u> <u>is</u> cloudy tomorrow, <u>we</u> <u>won't have</u> a picnic.
> **Example:** <u>He</u> <u>said</u> that the <u>fundamentals</u> <u>were</u> solid, so <u>I</u> <u>decided</u> to invest in the Internet startup.

B. Clauses can be further divided into two categories: dependent clauses and independent clauses.

C. A dependent clause cannot stand on its own as a complete sentence. The presence of a dependent clause will almost always be indicated by a single word at the beginning of the clause: a subordinating conjunction, interrogative, or relative pronoun. (These terms will be explained in the latter part of this handout.)

> **Example:** *<u>When</u> my free trial ran out*, I cancelled my subscription.
> **Example:** That couch, *<u>which</u> has been in my family for two generations*, will not be going to the dump!

D. An independent clause, on the other hand, constitutes a complete sentence without any additional words.

> **Example:** The <u>vase</u> <u>fell</u> to the floor.
> **Example:** The retired <u>teacher</u> <u>missed</u> his classroom.

Types of Dependent Clauses

Nominal Clauses

Sometimes we use a clause in place of a noun. Nominal clauses are preceded by either the word "that" or an interrogative ("who," "what," "where," "when," "how," "why," "which"). In the

following examples, notice that nominal clauses can often be replaced by a noun or pronoun and still be grammatically correct (though the original meaning may be lost).

> **Example:** She understood *that* her paper topic touched on some sensitive issues.
> **Substitution:** She understood *it*.
>
> **Example:** I know *what* the conductor is planning for the concert tonight.
> **Substitution:** I know *it*.

Relative Clauses

Also known as an adjectival clause, the relative clause is used to modify, describe, or quantify a noun. Relative clauses are preceded by a relative pronoun ("who," "what," "where," "when," "how," "why," "which").

> **Example:** My high-school guidance counselor, who has over thirty years of experience, gave me some good advice.

Like the nominal clause, the relative clause can be introduced by the pronoun "that." However, there is a difference between the two uses of "that." Notice how, in the example of a nominal clause below, "that" has no grammatical function within the clause: it is neither subject nor verb; it exists only to indicate to the reader when a nominal clause is beginning. In the relative clause example that follows, "that" has a definite grammatical function: it serves as the subject of the clause.

> **Example (nominal):** The CEO denied that he had taken part in the scandal.
> **Example (relative):** She bought her son a car that got thirty miles to the gallon.

Also note that the noun/pronoun substitution test only works when the "that" clause is functioning nominally. (*The CEO denied **it**.*)

Subordinate Clauses

Whereas nominal and relative clauses replace or describe words within the main clause, subordinate clauses function adverbially: they modify or contextualize the main verb of the sentence. Subordinate clauses may come before or after an independent clause in a sentence but never in the middle of it. Furthermore, a subordinate clause will always be preceded by a subordinating conjunction. There are dozens of subordinating conjunctions, but some of the more common ones are "if," "since," "although," "even though," and "because."

> **Example:** *Though* there are still several options available to students, the number and variety of classes have been reduced.
> **Example:** *If* history repeats itself, then we can expect these budget cuts to continue for another year or two.

Tests for Different Clauses

Nominal and Relative Clauses

It may seem difficult to differentiate between nominal and relative clauses, especially because both tend to begin with the same pronouns ("which," "who," "when," etc.); however, you can perform a simple test to determine what kind of clause you have. First, identify the boundaries of a clause that begins with a pronoun; notice where it begins and where it ends. Then, substitute the entire clause with "it" or any other noun. If the substitution test works, then you have a nominal clause; if the sentence sounds odd or broken, then you have a relative clause.

> **Nominal Clause:** She understood <u>that her paper topic touched on some sensitive issues</u>.
> She understood _____.
> She understood *it*.
>
> **Relative Clause:** She bought her son a car <u>that got thirty miles to the gallon</u>.
> She bought her son a car _____.
> She bought her son a car *it*.

Relative and Subordinate Clauses

Sometimes relative and subordinate clauses can be confused with one another, especially when they start with "when," which can function either as an interrogative (for a relative clause) or a subordinating conjunction (for a subordinate clause). Consider the two uses of "when" in the following examples. Can you tell which clause is relative and which is subordinate?

> **Example:** The sports team moved <u>when the city refused to fund a new stadium</u>.
> **Example:** Do you remember the time <u>when the sports team moved away</u>?
>
> Remember that the relative clause functions like an adjective, whereas the subordinate clause functions like an adverb. Adjectives *must* be next to the words they modify, while adverbs can be moved to different parts of the sentence without a loss or change in meaning. If the clause is at the end of the sentence, try moving it to the beginning; if the sentence sounds strange or becomes incomprehensible, then you have a relative clause.
>
> **Example (subordinate):** <u>When the city refused to fund a new stadium</u>, the sports team moved.
> **Example (relative):** <u>When the sports team moved away</u>, do you remember the time?
>
> Note that the second sentence does not make sense if you move the dependent clause, so you then know it is a relative clause. However, you can move a subordinate clause in a sentence, and the sentence retains its meaning.

Activity 1

Identify the clause(s) of each sentence; try underlining each subject/predicate pair you can find. Determine whether the clause is independent or dependent.

1. My car broke down yesterday, so I didn't make it to work on time.
2. Even if you do not meet the prerequisites for the class, you can fill out the required forms.
3. Meteorologists predict a dry winter this year.
4. We need to apply a new coat of sealant to our fishing boat; it nearly sunk last week.
5. Many construction contractors are out of work when the housing market is bad.

Activity 2

Determine the type of dependent clause(s) in each sentence (nominal, relative, subordinate). If you are having trouble deciding whether the clause is nominal or relative, try the substitution methods that are outlined in this handout.

1. Last weekend we went to several antique shops, though we didn't make any large purchases.
2. The city, which was first settled during the early Middle Ages, contains several architectural styles, though many of the original buildings were destroyed during World War II.
3. On my vacation, I visited where my mother was born.
4. Instead of going to the grocery store, you should shop at the local farmer's market, which has comparable prices.
5. Since you're having a dinner party next weekend, I know someone who can redo the finish on this coffee table.
6. The band started playing when the stage manager gave them the cue.
7. I gave her the report last week when she asked me to print out the final draft.
8. Though the judge has earned the label of being tough on crime, there are still rampant crime problems in the city.

Answer Key for Activity 1
1. car (subject) broke down (verb) (independent); I (s) didn't make (v) (independent)
2. you (s) do not meet (v) (dependent); you (s) can fill out (v) (independent)
3. meteorologists (s) predict (v) (independent)
4. we (s) need (v) (independent); it (s) sunk (v) (independent)
5. contractors (s) are (v) (independent); market (s) is (v) (dependent)

Answer Key for Activity 2
1. though we didn't make any large purchases = subordinate clause
2. which was first settled during the early Middle Ages = relative clause; though many of the original buildings were destroyed during World War II = subordinate clause
3. where my mother was born = nominal clause
4. which has comparable prices = relative clause
5. since you're having a dinner party next weekend = subordinate clause; who can redo the finish on this coffee table = relative clause
6. when the stage manager gave them the cue = subordinate clause
7. when she asked me to print out the final draft = relative clause
8. though the judge has earned the label of being tough on crime = subordinate clause