

Grammar Help Sheet: Clauses

An independent clause is one which can be used alone. It states a complete thought. It depends on no other clause.

The dog chased the rabbit down the meadow and into the woods.

The birds flew south in the winter and did not return.

The independent clause which plays the main part in the sentence is called the principal clause.

A simple sentence is made up of only this one principal clause.

Caesar was one of the greatest soldiers of all times.

A complex sentence is made up of a principal clause and one or more clauses dependent upon the principal clause.

The man rescued the boy who had fallen into the water.

When they left, Mr. Jones delivered a lecture to his family.

A compound sentence has no principal clause but is made up of two or more independent clauses of equal value.

The dog chased the rabbit down the meadow and into the woods, but the rabbit escaped him there.

The birds flew south for the winter, and only part of them returned the next year.

A compound-complex sentence has two or more independent clauses of equal value and in addition, one or more dependent clauses.

The dog chased the rabbit down the meadow, but the rabbit ran into thick brush where the dog could not see it.

A dependent clause (often called a subordinate clause) is one which modifies some word in another clause, or is used, in some way, as a part of speech. Dependent clauses are found only in complex sentences. They are used either as adjectives, adverbs, or nouns.

The man whom you met is my father.

(“Whom you met” is an adjective clause modifying the noun “man.”)

The girl sang when she was happy.

(“When she was happy” is an adverbial clause used to modify the verb “sang.”)

Notice especially the use of noun clauses. When a noun clause is used in a sentence, the noun clause itself is dependent, but it is necessary to state the noun clause with the remainder of the sentence in order to complete the principal clause.

I know what he said.

(“What he said” is a noun clause used as object of the verb “know.”)

At noon he gave this answer: “I cannot go.”

(“I cannot go” is the noun clause used as an appositive to the noun “answer.”)