



Clauses and Phrases

Introduction

We use clauses and phrases all the time, every day! What are they? First, some definitions.

- **Clause:** a group of words in a sentence with a subject and verb
- **Phrases:** a group of words in a sentence without a subject and verb

Examples of Clauses

1. He ran.

This sentence consists of one clause: “he ran”

2. He ran when it rained.

This sentence consists of two clauses: “he ran” and “when it rained”

Examples of a Phrase

1. to the post office

This is a familiar phrase

Putting a clause and a phrase together

1. He ran to the post office.

This sentence consists of the clause “he ran” and the phrase “to the post office”

2. He ran to the post office when it rained.

This sentence consists of the two clauses “he ran” and “when it rained,” and the phrase “to the post office”

3. He ran, when it rained, to the post office.

Another version using commas. Note how this version is more interesting.

(I) CLAUSES

Clauses come in two varieties: **independent and dependent**

What is an independent clause?

An independent clause is a clause that can stand alone. That is why it is called independent.

Example:

1. Life would be boring without music.

The entirety of this sentence consists of one independent clause.

2. Without music, life would be boring.

Another version using commas and inverting the sequence. Note how this version is also more interesting.

Putting an independent clause and phrase together

1. He ran to the post office.

We saw this already but now we recognize that “he ran” is an independent clause because it can stand alone.

2. To the post office he ran.

Note how you can play with words for a different effect even though the meaning is the same.

What is a dependent clause?

A dependent clause is a clause that depends on an independent clause. That is why it is called a dependent clause.

Examples:

- When umbrellas were invented

This clause contains a subject and verb, but it cannot stand alone as a sentence.

- When umbrellas were invented, people also used them for protection from the sun.

Note how the clause “when umbrellas were invented” depends on the clause that follows the comma. Note also that the clause “people also used them for protection from the sun” is an independent clause because it can stand alone.

Two varieties of dependent clauses

There are two kinds of dependent clauses: **adverb clauses** and **adjective clauses**

Adverb clauses

An adverb clause, also called a subordinate clause, starts with a conjunction such as *although, because, when, or until*.

Examples of adverb clauses

1. **When the bond issue passes**, the city will build a subway.

Note that “when the bond issue passes” cannot stand alone, but that “the city will build a subway” can stand alone. Note also that the adverb clause modifies the verb phrase “will build.” That is why it is called an adverb clause. In this example, it answers the question of when something will happen.

2. They are drawing up plans **as quickly as they can**.

Note that “They are drawing up plans” can stand alone, but “as quickly as they can” cannot stand alone. Note also that the adverb phrase “as quickly as they can” modifies the verb phrase “drawing up.” In this example, it explains how something will happen.

3. The people felt happy **because they had more money in their pockets**.

Note that the adverb phrase “because they had more money in their pocket” modifies the verb phrase “felt happy.” In this example, it explains why.

Noun Clauses

A noun clause is a clause that operates a noun.

Clues to a noun clause:

Noun clauses often begin with: what, that, who, whom, which, when, where, whether, why, and how

Examples of noun clauses

1. **What politicians promise** is not always dependable.
2. Good politicians understand **whom they must please**.
3. **Politicians who make big promises** cannot be trusted.

(II) PHRASES

A phrase is a group of words that does not contain both a subject and verb and therefore cannot stand alone.

Prepositional phrases

- A prepositional phrase always starts with a preposition such as: *at, by, for, from, in, to, with*
- A prepositional phrase has a preposition and its object.
- We already encountered the phrase “**to the post office**.”

Examples of prepositional phrases

1. He ran **to her**.

“He ran” is an independent clause and “to her” is a prepositional phrase which begins with the preposition “to” and “her” is the object.

2. The cat ran away **from me**.

“The cat ran away” is an independent clause and “from me” is a prepositional phrase starting with the preposition “from” and “me” is the object.

Noun phrases

A noun phrase is a phrase that operates as a noun in a sentence.

Example of a noun phrase

1. **The modern census** began in the seventeenth century.

“Modern census” contains the adjective “modern” which modifies the noun “census,” but together they operate as a noun.

Verb Phrases

A verb phrase operates on a verb in a sentence.

An example of a verb phrase

1. Two censuses **are mentioned** in the Bible.

“Are mentioned” contain two verbs: “are” and “mentioned.” Together they operate as a verb.

Verbal phrases

A verbal phrase contains a verb but does not operate as a verb. It operates as a noun or adjective.

Examples of verbal phrases

1. **Eating slowly**, the child was happy.

Note that although the phrase “eating slowly” contains the verb “eating,” it does not operate as a verb. It operates as an adjective.

2. **Going from door to door**, census takers interview millions of people.

“Going from door to door” is a verbal phrase that modifies “census takers.”

Participial phrase

Participial phrases always operate as adjectives. They can be identified with a verb ending in “-ing” and frequently ending with “-d”, “-ed”, “-en”, “-n”, or “-t”.

Examples of participial phrases

1. **Being a philosopher**, he has a problem for every solution.

“Being a philosopher” is a participial phrase with a “-ing” verb.

2. People **kept in the dark** will never save the world.

The participial phrase “kept in the dark” contains a verb ending in “t” but acts as an adjective that modifies “people”.

Gerund phrases

Gerund phrases can be tricky because they also feature verbs ending in “-ing” but they operate differently from participial phrases. Instead of operating as adjectives, they always operate as nouns.

Examples of gerund phrases

1. **Justifying a fault** makes it worse.

Compare this to “A lie makes it worse” in which “lie” is obviously a noun. Now you can see that “justifying a fault” operates as a noun. It is called a gerund phrase.

2. **Learning Latin** can be fun.

“Learning Latin” is gerund phrase which contains the gerund “learning.” A gerund is a verb which expresses uncompleted action.

Absolute phrases

Absolute phrases are called absolute because they modify the entire sentence it is in.

Examples of absolute phrase

1. **His words dipped in honey**, the orator mesmerized the crowd.

“His words dipped in honey” modifies the entire sentence.

2. Eighteenth century Sweden had a complete record of its population, **every adult and child having been counted**.

“Every adult and child having been counted” modifies the entire sentence.

Infinitive phrases

Infinitive phrases are usually constructed with “to” plus the base form of a verb (e.g., to call, to drink, etc). An infinitive phrase can operate as an adjective, adverb, or noun within in a sentence.

Examples of infinitive phrases

1. We do not have the right to **abandon the poor**.

The infinitive phrase “to abandon the poor” operates as an adjective that modifies the noun “right”.

2. He cut off his nose **to spite his face**.

The infinitive phrase “to spite his face” operates as an adverb that modifies the verb “cut.”

Appositive phrases

An appositive phrase describes a noun or pronoun, not just one word.

An example of an appositive phrase

1. Politicians, **acrobats at heart**, can sit on a fence and yet keep both ears to the ground.

The phrase “acrobats at heart” describes “politicians.”

Practice Exercise

Underline the independent clause in each sentence, and circle the dependent clause. Then label it an adverb clause or adjective clause.

1. Eighteenth-century ladies carried fancy umbrellas as a fashion statement while strolling down the street.
2. Although umbrellas are mostly used today in the rain, they have many other uses.
3. Men in England carry sturdy umbrellas, which make convenient walking sticks.
4. When the lights went down, the curtain came up.
5. If you receive an anonymous email, don't answer it.
6. I saw the moon, which was glowing brightly.