

Clauses, Phrases, and Commas

Clauses contain a subject and a verb.

Phrases can have one or the other (i.e., a subject or a verb)—or neither—but never both.

Examples

Clauses: *If everything goes well* (Subject: *everything*; verb: *goes*)
we expect to finish this project by early next week (Subject: *we*; verb: *expect*)

Phrase: *by early next week* (neither subject nor verb)

Having looked over your report, I am convinced, now more than ever, that we are on the right track.

Phrase: Having looked over your report (verb, but no subject)

Clause: I am convinced (subject and verb)

Phrase: now more than ever

Clause: that we are on the right track

Phrase: on the right track

The two types of clauses: independent and dependent.

Independent: Sometimes called the main clause, an independent clause not only has a subject and verb, but also represents a complete thought. Independent clauses can stand on their own as sentences.

Dependent: Also known as a subordinate clause, a dependent clause does not represent a complete thought. It cannot stand alone as a sentence. Dependent clauses rely on independent clauses to complete the thought in the sentence.

Dependent clause: If we work hard at this

Independent clause: we can succeed

Commas (to set off clauses and phrases)

Use commas to set off words, clauses, and phrases that are separate from or interrupt the main idea of the sentence.

Words, clauses, and phrases that come at the beginning of a sentence and precede an independent clause should usually be followed by a comma, with the exception of short introductory phrases that indicate time or place.

Instead of: *As you requested I have cancelled your trip to the fourth dimension.*

Write: *As you requested, I have cancelled your trip to the fourth dimension.*

As you requested is a dependent clause. It precedes the independent clause: *I have cancelled your trip to the fourth dimension.*

Instead of: *Thinking about last week's conversation, has given me a headache.*

Write: *Thinking about last week's conversation has given me a headache.*

Thinking about last week's conversation is a phrase serving as the subject of the verb *has given*. It should not be separated from its verb.

Sometimes you have the option of separating a phrase from the rest of the sentence. In the following examples use a comma if you want to pause between the phrase and the rest of the sentence. Omit the comma if you don't.

Option A: Of course we will leave the solar system by the end of December.

Option B: Of course, we will leave the solar system by the end of December.

Keep in mind...

In general, if a word, phrase, or clause can be removed without substantially affecting the meaning of the sentence it should be set apart by commas. If, without the word, phrase, or clause, the sentence's meaning would be significantly altered, then the word, phrase, or clause is essential and should not be set off by commas.

Instead of: *My roommate a Star Trek fan has helped me a great deal with my Klingon grammar.*

Write:: *My roommate, a Star Trek fan, has helped me a great deal with my Klingon grammar.*

The phrase *a Star Trek fan* is not essential to the meaning of the sentence. Without the phrase, the basic meaning of the sentence would be intact: *My roommate has helped me a great deal with my Klingon grammar.*

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