

PHRASE vs. CLAUSE

In order to punctuate sentences correctly and avoid fragments, we need to know the difference between two kinds of word groups: **phrases** and **clauses**.

We can see the difference in the following two groups of words:

1. the bus to Eastmont Mall
2. the bus goes to Eastmont Mall

In the second group of words, we can identify a subject-verb unit, while in the first we cannot.

To find the subject-verb units in sentences, follow these two steps:

1. First find the verb by applying the time test: change the time or tense of the sentence; the word you change is the verb.

In number 2, we can change

- The bus *goes* to Eastmont Mall.
- to: The bus *went* to Eastmont Mall. (yesterday)
- or: The bus *will go* to Eastmont Mall. (tomorrow)

When we change the time, we have to change *goes* to *went* or to *will go*, so *to go* is the verb.

2. To find the subject, ask "Who or what does the action of the verb?" What "goes?" The answer is **the bus**, so **the bus** is the subject of the verb.

(Alternatively, one can ask what is the first noun in the sentence, and that is almost always going to be the subject of the sentence.)

DEFINITION OF CLAUSE AND PHRASE:

- A **clause** is a group of words with a subject-verb unit; the 2nd group of words contains the subject-verb unit *the bus goes*, so it is a clause.
- A **phrase** is a group of words without a subject-verb unit. If we try to change the time or tense of the 1st group of words, we cannot, because it contains no word that changes to show time or tense. It has no verb, so it can't have a subject-verb unit. It is a phrase.

HOW TO FIND A PHRASE vs A CLAUSE

To find out if a group of words is a complete sentence, you can use this trick: Add **Is it true that** before the words. If the question does not make sense, the group of words is a sentence fragment. If the question does make sense, the group of words is a complete sentence. Consider the examples below.

1. **Is it true that** the bus to Eastmont Mall?
2. **Is it true that** the bus goes to Eastmont Mall?

The first question above does not make sense. It does have a subject ("the bus"). But it does not have a verb, and it is not a complete idea. It is a phrase, and hence a sentence fragment.

However, the second question does make sense. It has a subject and a verb and is a complete idea. Therefore, "The bus goes to Eastmont Mall" is clause, and it is also a complete sentence.

PHRASES CONTINUED

Special Kinds of Phrases:

Our goal here is to fix fragments, run-ons, and comma splices, and to fix all of these, we have to know the difference between a phrase and a clause. Here are two kinds of phrases that sometimes look like clauses.

- 1) **-ing phrases:** When you look for verbs in sentences, remember that the *-ing* form of a word cannot be a verb all by itself, so the group of words

succeeding in school despite working full time

is a phrase, not a clause. To make this phrase into a clause, we need to complete the verb by adding a form of the verb *be*:

The student *was succeeding in school* despite working full time.

We can make sure that an *-ing* word is part of a main verb by checking to see if the *-ing* word follows a form of the verb *to be* (*am, is, are, was, were, will be, has been, have been, had been, will have been*).

Examples: Trevor is *working* as a security guard.

Trevor *was working* as a security guard last year.

Trevor *has been working* as a security guard for three years.

- 2) **another kind of phrase:** It's obvious that "happy people" is a phrase. But so is "people who are happy." A special kind of phrase follows this pattern:

noun + who	people who are happy
noun + which	habits which annoy me
noun + that	dog that lives next door

Even though these structures contain a verb, they are still considered phrases because the noun before the *who, which, or that* does not have its own verb. These phrases modify nouns in sentences:

People *who are happy* often have creative hobbies.

My brother has many habits *which annoy me*.

The dog *that lives next door* is friendly to everyone.

These phrases set off by words like *who, which, or that* (relative pronouns) do not count as clauses.

Two Kinds of Clauses

You now know what a clause is, but there are two kinds of clauses you need to know about: **dependent and independent**. To see the difference between the two kinds, read the examples below:

1. Mary broke my cellphone. (independent clause)
2. *because* Mary broke my cellphone (dependent clause)

The second clause has a subject and a verb (Mary broke) but it can't stand on its own. It depends on another clause to give it meaning. It is easy to hear dependent clauses if you read them out loud. After an independent clause, you will feel relaxed, like an idea is complete, but after a dependent clause, you will still be waiting; you will have unanswered questions. What happened because Mary broke the cellphone? The idea isn't complete. This is why it is dependent. If you still have questions after hearing a group of words, chances are you are dealing with a dependent clause (or a phrase).

More specifically, the clause is dependent because of the word *because*. Words like *because* are called **subordinators**. When we use a subordinator at the beginning of a clause, the clause becomes dependent (or subordinate) and can no longer stand alone as a sentence. Dependent clauses (subordinate clauses) should always be attached to independent clauses.

Examples: *Because* Mary broke my cellphone, I had to get another phone on craigslist.
 dependent clause + independent clause = sentence

I had to get another phone on craigslist *because* Mary broke my cellphone.
 independent clause + dependent clause = sentence

Some Common Subordinators and their logical meaning
Cause / Effect because, since, so that
Comparison / Contrast although, even though, though, whereas, while
Place & Manner how, however, where, wherever
Possibility / Conditions if, whether, unless
Relation that, which, who
Time after, as, before, since, when, whenever, while, until

Some examples of **dependent clauses**, with **subordinators** underlined:

When the child went to the dentist
Because his girlfriend is upset
Although she will buy new shoes

Can you hear how these all sound unfinished? **Subordinators** are a great tool for connecting ideas.