



# TCS Writing Centre

## Subordinate Clauses

A **subordinate clause**—also called a **dependent clause**—will begin with a **subordinate conjunction** or a **relative pronoun** and will contain both a **subject** and a **verb**. This combination of words will **not** form a **complete sentence**. It will instead make a reader want additional information to finish the thought.

Here is a list of subordinate conjunctions:

|               |               |          |
|---------------|---------------|----------|
| after         | once          | until    |
| although      | provided that | when     |
| as            | rather than   | whenever |
| because       | since         | where    |
| before        | so that       | whereas  |
| even if       | than          | wherever |
| even though   | that          | whether  |
| if            | though        | while    |
| in order that | unless        | why      |

Here are your relative pronouns:

|           |         |          |
|-----------|---------|----------|
| that      | who     | whose    |
| which     | whoever | whomever |
| whichever | whom    |          |

Now take a look at these examples:

After Amy sneezed all over the tuna salad

*After* = subordinate conjunction; *Amy* = subject; *sneezed* = verb.

Once Adam smashed the spider

*Once* = subordinate conjunction; *Adam* = subject; *smashed* = verb.

Until Mr. Sanchez has his first cup of coffee

*Until* = subordinate conjunction; *Mr. Sanchez* = subject; *has* = verb.

Who ate handfuls of Cheerios with his bare hands

*Who* = relative pronoun; *Who* = subject; *ate* = verb.

**Remember this important point:** A subordinate clause cannot stand alone as a sentence because it does not provide a complete thought. The reader is left wondering, “So what happened?” A word group that begins with a capital letter and ends with a period must contain at least one **main clause**. Otherwise, you will have written a **fragment**, a major error.

After Amy sneezed all over the tuna salad.

So what happened? Did Amy throw it down the garbage disposal or serve it on toast to her friends? No complete thought = fragment.

Once Adam smashed the spider.

So what happened? Did Belinda cheer him for his bravery or lecture him on animal rights? No complete thought = fragment.

Until Mr. Sanchez has his first cup of coffee.

So what happens? Is he too sleepy to work, or does he have a grumpy disposition? No complete thought = fragment.

Who ate handfuls of Cheerios with his bare hands.

So what happened? Were the roommates shocked, or did they ask him to pass the box so that they could do the same? No complete thought = fragment.

Correctly attach a subordinate clause to a main clause.

When you attach a subordinate clause *in front of* a **main clause**, use a comma, like this:

+ , + .

*Even though the broccoli was covered in cheddar cheese*, Emily refused to eat it.

*Unless Christine finishes her calculus homework*, she will have to suffer Mr. Nguyen's wrath in class tomorrow.

*While Bailey slept on the sofa in front of the television*, Samson, the family dog, gnawed on the leg of the coffee table.

When you attach a subordinate clause *at the end of* a main clause, you will generally use *no punctuation*, like this:

+ Ø + .

Tanya did poorly on her history exam Ø *because her best friend Giselle insisted on gossiping during their study session the night before*.

Jonathon spent his class time reading comic books Ø *since his average was a 45 one week before final exams*.

Diane decided to plant tomatoes in the back of the yard Ø *where the sun blazed the longest during the day*.

**Punctuate carefully when the subordinate clause begins with a *relative pronoun*.**

Subordinate clauses can begin with relative pronouns [and thus are called **relative clauses**, a type of subordinate clause]. When a subordinate clause starts with *who*, *whose*, or *which*, for example, punctuation gets a little bit trickier. Sometimes you will need a comma, and sometimes you won't, depending on whether the clause is essential or nonessential.

When the information in the relative clause clarifies an otherwise general noun, the clause is **essential** and will follow the same pattern that you saw above:

+ Ø + .

Nick gave a handful of potato chips to the dog Ø *who was sniffing around the picnic tables*.

*Dog* is a general noun. Which one are we talking about? The relative clause *who was sniffing around the picnic tables* clarifies the animal that we mean. The clause is thus essential and requires no punctuation.

When a relative clause follows a specific noun, punctuation changes. The information in the relative clause is no longer as important, and the clause becomes nonessential. **Nonessential clauses** require you to use commas to connect them.

+ , +

Nick gave a handful of potato chips to Button , *who was sniffing around the picnic tables*.

*Button*, the name of a *unique dog*, lets us know which animal we mean. The information in the relative clause is no longer important and needs to be separated from the main clause with a comma.

Relative clauses can also *interrupt* a main clause. When this happens, use no punctuation for an essential clause. If the clause is nonessential, separate it with a comma in front *and* a comma behind. Take a look at these examples:

After dripping mustard all over his chest, the man Ø *who was wearing a red shirt* Ø wished that he had instead chosen ketchup for his hotdog.

After dripping mustard all over his chest, Charles, *who was wearing a red shirt*, wished that he had instead chosen ketchup for his hotdog.

**Use subordination to combine ideas effectively.**

Writers use subordination to combine two ideas in a single sentence. Read these two simple sentences:

Rhonda gasped. A six-foot snake slithered across the sidewalk.

Since the two simple sentences are related, you can combine them to express the action more effectively:

Rhonda gasped *when* a six-foot snake slithered across the sidewalk.

If the two ideas have unequal importance, save the most important one for the end of the sentence so that your reader remembers it best. If we rewrite the example above so that the two ideas are flipped, the wrong point gets emphasized:

When a six-foot snake slithered across the side walk, Rhonda gasped.

A reader is less concerned with Rhonda's reaction than the presence of a giant snake on the sidewalk!