**Sentences: Simple, Compound, and Complex**

Experienced writers use a variety of sentences to make their writing interesting and lively. Too many simple sentences, for example, will sound choppy and immature while too many long sentences will be difficult to read and hard to understand.

This page contains definitions of simple, compound, and complex sentences with many simple examples. The purpose of these examples is to help the ESL/EFL learner to identify sentence basics including identification of sentences in the short quizzes that follow. After that, it will be possible to analyze more complex sentence varieties.

**Simple Sentence**

A simple sentence, also called an independent clause, contains a subject and a verb, and it expresses a complete thought. In the following simple sentences, subjects are in yellow, and verbs are in green.

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| 1. Some students like to study in the mornings. 2. Juan and Arturo play football every afternoon. 3. Alicia goes to the library and studies every day. |

The three examples above are all simple sentences. Note that sentence 2 contains a compound subject, and sentence 3 contains a compound verb. Simple sentences, therefore, contain a subject and verb and express a complete thought, but they can also contain compound subjects or verbs.

**Compound Sentence**

A compound sentence contains two independent clauses joined by a coordinator. The coordinators are as follows: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so. (Helpful hint: The first letter of each of the coordinators spells FANBOYS.) Except for very short sentences, coordinators are always preceded by a comma. In the following compound sentences, subjects are in yellow, verbs are in green, and the coordinators and the commas that precede them are in red.

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| 1. I tried to speak Spanish, and my friend tried to speak English. 2. Alejandro played football, so Maria went shopping. 3. Alejandro played football, for Maria went shopping. |

The above three sentences are compound sentences. Each sentence contains two independent clauses, and they are joined by a coordinator with a comma preceding it. Note how the conscious use of coordinators can change the meaningof the sentences. Sentences 2 and 3, for example, are identical except for the coordinators. In sentence 2, which action occurred first? Obviously, "Alejandro played football" first, and as a consequence, "Maria went shopping." In sentence 3, "Maria went shopping" first. In sentence 3, "Alejandro played football" because, possibly, he didn't have anything else to do, *for* or *because* "Maria went shopping." How can the use of other coordinators change the relationship between the two clauses? What implications would the use of "yet" or "but" have on the meaning of the sentence?

**Complex Sentence**

**A True Story**

Some students believe it is possible to identify simple, compound, and complex sentences by looking at the *complexity*of the ideas in a sentence. Is the idea in the sentence simple, or is it complex? Does one idea in a sentence make it simple? Do two ideas make it compound? **However, sentence identification does not work that way.**

Please take the time to identify the subjects and verbs in a sentence. Then identify coordinators and subordinators when they exist. With these two steps, sentence identification not only becomes easy, but it also provides the foundation for understanding and writing all other kinds of more complicated sentences.

A complex sentence has an independent clause joined by one or more dependent clauses. A complex sentence always has a subordinator such as *because*, *since*, *after*, *although*, or *when* (and many others) or a relative pronoun such as *that*, *who*, or *which*. In the following complex sentences, subjects are in yellow, verbs are in green, and the subordinators and their commas (when required) are in red.

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| 1. When he handed in his homework, he forgot to give the teacher the last page. 2. The teacher returned the homework after she noticed the error. 3. The students are studying because they have a test tomorrow. 4. After they finished studying, Juan and Maria went to the movies 5. Juan and Maria went to the movies after they finished studying. |

When a complex sentence begins with a subordinator such as sentences 1 and 4, a comma is required at the end of the dependent clause. When the independent clause begins the sentence with subordinators in the middle as in sentences 2, 3, and 5, no comma is required. If a comma is placed before the subordinators in sentences 2, 3, and 5, it is wrong.

Note that sentences 4 and 5 are the same except sentence 4 begins with the dependent clause which is followed by a comma, and sentence 5 begins with the independent clause which contains no comma. The comma after the dependent clause in sentence 4 is required, and experienced listeners of English will often*hear* a slight pause there. In sentence 5, however, there will be no pause when the independent clause begins the sentence.

**Complex Sentences / Adjective Clauses**

Finally, sentences containing adjective clauses (or dependent clauses) are also complex because they contain an independent clause and a dependent clause. The subjects, verbs, and subordinators are marked the same as in the previous sentences, and in these sentences, the independent clauses are also underlined.

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| 1. The woman who called my mom sells cosmetics. 2. The book that Jonathan read is on the shelf. 3. The house which Abraham Lincoln was born in is still standing. 4. The town where I grew up is in the United States. |

Adjective Clauses are studied in this site separately, but for now it is important to know that sentences containing adjective clauses are complex.

**Conclusion and Quizzes**

Are you sure you now know the differences between simple, compound, and complex sentences? Click **[QUICK QUIZ](http://eslbee.com/cgi-bin/quiztest.cgi?simplecompoundorcomplex" \t "_blank)**(will open in new window) to find out. This first quiz is just six sentences. The key is to look for the subjects and verbs first. After taking the quiz, you will see your score, and you will also have an opportunity to LISTEN TO THE AUDIO (four minutes) explaining *why* the sentences are simple, compound, or complex.

For extra practice, the **[Helen Keller Quiz](http://eslbee.com/cgi-bin/quiztest.cgi?helenkeller" \t "_blank)** (will open in new window) contains ten quiz questions, and ***[The Americanization of Shadrach Cohen](http://eslbee.com/cgi-bin/quiztest.cgi?shadrach" \t "_blank)*** quiz (will open in new window) contains 29 questions. With the skill to identify and write good simple, compound, and complex sentences, you will have the flexibility to (1) convey your ideas precisely and (2) entertain with sentence variety at the same time! Good luck with these exercises!

Finally, if you have not already done so, download the [**Transitions and Connectors Worksheet**](http://eslbee.com/transitions.pdf) to help identify simple, compound, and complex sentences.