

Subordinating Conjunctions and Subordinate Clauses

This handout discusses how subordinating conjunctions, or *subordinators*, help writers create *cohesion*, or “togetherness,” within their writing, and how these conjunctions signal different logical links between ideas. It also explains how to punctuate sentences containing subordinators based on the arrangement of the sentence. In addition, this handout references outside resources to help you continue to hone your writing skills.

What Do Conjunctions Do?

Conjunctions join things—words to words, phrases to phrases, or clauses to clauses—and they signal logical relationships among them. Consider the following examples. (Conjunctions are italicized.)

1. Johnny is skinny. He doesn't work out.
2. Johnny is skinny *because* he doesn't work out.
3. Johnny is skinny *although* he doesn't work out.

Notice that different conjunctions define different relationships between ideas. The first example uses no conjunction, so the relationship between the clauses is unclear. The second example uses the conjunction *because*, thus establishing a cause-and-effect relationship between the clauses: Johnny is skinny, not buff, as a result of lack of exercise. On the other hand, the third example creates contrast between the two clauses by using the conjunction *although*: despite that fact that Johnny doesn't exercise, he does not gain weight. The above examples show why we use conjunctions: to express the relationships between ideas as clearly as possible.

What Do Subordinating Conjunctions Do?

Subordinating conjunctions are one type of *conjunction*, which join clauses to clauses. (Remember that a *clause* is a group of words containing a subject and a verb.) The word *subordinating* means that the conjunction *subordinates* one clause to another. Think *sub* as in *under*: a clause introduced by a subordinating conjunction is on a lower order of importance in the sentence. In short, a subordinating conjunction

- a. makes the clause it precedes subordinate and
- b. joins that clause to another clause.

How Do I Identify Subordinating Conjunctions?

Unlike *coordinating conjunctions*, subordinating conjunctions are far too many to remember using an acronym (see [Coordinating Conjunctions](#)). However, unlike coordinators, subordinators can be “played by ear”: that is, we can test to confirm whether a word is a subordinator by putting it at the beginning of a complete sentence. If adding the word makes the sentence into a fragment, then the word is a subordinator. Consider the following example.

Charlie chugged the cola.

when Charlie chugged the cola

Charlie chugged the cola is an independent clause as it has both a subject and a verb and expresses a complete thought. It can stand on its own as a complete sentence. Add *when* to the beginning, and the clause becomes dependent: it is still a clause (since it has both a subject and a verb), but it does not express a complete thought. The reader is left with the question, “What happened when Charlie chugged the cola?” To express a complete thought, the dependent clause requires an independent clause.

When Charlie chugged the cola, the sport of competitive cola drinking changed forever.

Try the following exercise to tune your ear to find subordinate clauses. Keep in mind that coordinating conjunctions, or FANBOYS (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*), are not subordinators, and therefore, they do not make clauses subordinate, so clauses linked with coordinating conjunctions remain independent.

Activity 1: Recognizing Subordinate Clauses

Identify any subordinate clauses, and underline subordinating conjunctions. An answer key for this activity is included at the end of this handout.

1. the bar fight finished with a bang
2. after the boy swept up the broken glass
3. as the sun fell over Frisco
4. and they walked around the rainy streets

What Are the Functions of Subordinating Conjunctions and Subordinate Clauses?

Within a sentence, a subordinate clause provides information complementary to an independent clause; the subordinator that introduces a subordinate clause signals the exact relationship between the clauses.

The boy prayed as the ground shook.

The example above is composed of two clauses.

The boy prayed (independent clause)

as the ground shook (dependent subordinate clause)

Notice that the dependent subordinate clause *as the ground shook* provides information that elaborates on the independent clause *the boy prayed*; the conjunction *as* serves to establish the relationship between the two clauses, namely that both things happened at the same time.

On the table below, subordinating conjunctions are categorized according to the types of relationships that they can establish between clauses.

Showing Causal Relationships	Granting Concessions	Specifying Conditions	Telling Place	Signaling Temporal Relationships	Setting up Comparison	Setting up Contrasts
as because in order so that now that since	although as as though even though just as though whereas while	even if if in case provided unless	where wherever	after as as soon as as long as before once still till until when whenever while	as as though	though whereas while although

Although this table does not provide an exhaustive list of subordinating conjunctions or the types of relationships that they may create between clauses, it illustrates the variety of relationships that you can establish between clauses by using subordinating conjunctions.

Activity 2: Adding Subordinators for Cohesion

The following paragraph contains only independent clauses and no conjunctions. Use conjunctions to specify the relationships between the ideas in the paragraph. Discuss your answers and other potential answers with your tutor.

_____ the drones attacked, American officials had “no reason to believe either hostage was present,” according to Earnest. United States officials also did not know that Farouq or Gadahn were present at the targeted sites, and “neither was specifically targeted.”

And in a press briefing Thursday, Earnest said U.S. officials believed with “near certainty” there were no hostages at the site of the strike even _____ U.S. officials had conducted “hundreds of hours of surveillance” on the al Qaeda compound and “near continuous surveillance in the days leading up to the operation.”

“Unfortunately, _____ that (assessment) was not correct, the operation led to this tragic, unintended consequence,” Earnest said.

Source:

Diamond, Jeremy. “U.S. Drone Strike Accidentally 2 Hostages” *CNN.com*. 23 Aug. 2014. Web. 19 May 2015.

How Do I Punctuate Subordinating Conjunctions?

Now that you understand the fundamental structures of subordination, let’s look at some more surface-level structures. There are punctuation rules to keep in mind when using subordinators. Sentences containing subordinating conjunctions are punctuated differently depending on the arrangement of the clauses of the sentence. Consider the following examples.

1. Jerry slid to home plate as the ball flew overhead.
2. As the ball flew overhead, Jerry slid to home plate.

Both examples comprise the same clauses and use the same conjunction (*as*). So why does Example 2 contain a comma, and why doesn’t Example 1? The rule is simple: if the independent clause precedes the dependent clause, no comma is necessary; if the dependent clause precedes the independent clause, then a comma is necessary.

You might find a formula helpful in remembering this punctuation rule.

Formulas for Punctuating Sentences Containing Dependent Clauses

1. Independent clause + subordinator + dependent clause.
2. Subordinator + dependent clause + , + independent clause.

Activity 3: Correcting Punctuation of Subordinating Conjunctions

Correct any punctuation errors in the following sentences. An answer key for this activity is included at the end of this handout.

1. She plays guitar, when she sings.
2. As they harvested tomatoes they spoke little.
3. The crimes persisted although the police always roamed the street.
4. James Brown is funkiest, because he dances better than anyone.

Activity 4: Revising and Editing Your Own Work

Now return to your own paper, looking for subordinate conjunctions. Check the logic of your sentences, and edit your work to make sure you have effectively signaled the subordination using commas where needed. Bring the results back to your next tutoring session.

Answer Key for Activity 1

1. the bar fight finished with a bang (independent clause, no subordinator)
2. after the boy swept up the broken glass (dependent clause, subordinator *after*)
3. as the sun fell over Frisco (dependent clause, subordinator *as*)
4. and they walked around the rainy streets (independent clause, no subordinator)

Answer Key for Activity 3

1. She plays guitar when she sings.
2. As they harvested tomatoes, they spoke little.
3. The crimes persisted although the police always roamed the street. (Original sentence is correct—no changes necessary.)
4. James Brown is funkiest because he dances better than anyone.

References

“Conjunctions.” *Townson.edu*. n.d. Web. 19 May 2015.

Lunsford, Andrea. *The Everyday Writer*. 5th Edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2013. Print.

MIT. “Resources for Writers: Introduction Strategies.” *Writing and Communication Center*.

Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies. n.d. Web. 19 March 2014.

Nordquist, Richard. “Subordinating Conjunctions.” *About.com*. n.d. Web. 19 May 2015.

“The Subordinate Conjunction.” *Chompchomp.com*. n.d. Web. 19 May 2015.