

Sentence Structure

Knowing the basic sentence structures or sentence types of English helps writers in a variety of ways. Knowing the basic sentence types offers writers control over how they choose to present information. For some writers, learning the basic sentence patterns can make it easier to check sentence structure at the editing stage of writing. This handout shows how to recognize and create different types of sentences based on formulas. It also shows how to link ideas in order to indicate the relationship between them. The formulas below are adapted from Schumaker & Sheldon (1985) and illustrate the most common sentence patterns of English.

Sentence Types

All sentence types have subject/s, verb/s, and represent a complete statement. The three most common sentence types are simple, compound, and complex.

Simple = I

A simple sentence, also called an **independent clause (I)**, minimally contains one subject and one verb and is a complete statement:

“She laughed.”

Other descriptive phrases can be added, but the sentence remains simple:

“In the middle of the night, **she laughed** uproariously for a full 30 seconds.”

Compound = I, cc I or I; I or I; tw, I

A compound sentence minimally contains two simple sentences (or independent clauses) that are joined by a coordinating conjunction (**cc**)* or a semi-colon. Note that a comma without a coordinating conjunction (cc) is a comma splice and is incorrect. In a compound sentence, the ideas in both parts of the sentence are equally emphasized by the writer.

“The joke was funny, **so** she laughed.” (I, cc I)

“The joke was funny; she laughed.” (I; I)

The **I;I** pattern can also include transition words (**tw**)* to highlight the relationship between the ideas in the sentence.

“The joke was funny; **consequently**, she laughed.” (I; tw, I)

Complex = I D or D, I

Complex sentences are made up of independent clauses and **dependent clauses (D)**. The idea in the independent clause is emphasized by the writer over the idea in the dependent clause. D clauses begin with subordinators (e.g. *because, since, while*)* and contain subjects and verbs; however, they cannot stand on their own as complete sentences. This is because subordinators indicate relationships between two ideas, both of which must be expressed in the sentence.

“Because she laughed...” (D).

Can you hear how the sentence is unfinished? The sentence sounds unfinished because it is missing an idea. Adding an independent clause completes the thought.

“Because she laughed, **I knew the joke was funny**” (D, I).

“**I knew the joke was funny** because she laughed” (ID).

**The table on the following page lists coordinating conjunctions, transition words, and subordinators.*

Sentence Structure Table

	Compound Sentences		Complex Sentences
	I, cc I	I; I or I; tw, I	ID or D, I
Relationships between ideas	Coordinating Conjunctions (cc)	Transition Words (tw)	Subordinators
Addition	and	likewise also moreover besides in the same way in addition	
Contrast or Contradiction	but yet	still in contrast nevertheless however on the other hand instead	though although even though
Cause (or Reason) and Effect (or Result)	so for	consequently thus hence therefore accordingly as a result	because as since so that in order that
Alternatives	or nor	otherwise alternatively	
General to Specific		for example for instance more specifically	
Condition			if even if as if as though unless
Time		meanwhile after awhile subsequently thereafter then now eventually presently	as long as since while until before after whenever when as soon as
Place			where wherever

Table modified from page 79 of McDonald, Orsini, and Wagner.

NOTE: Some of the words in this chart are used not only to link clauses, but also for other purposes which may require different or no punctuation. The rules discussed here are ONLY for linking clauses.

Sources

- McDonald, B., Orsini, L. & Wagner, T. J. (1985). *Sentence Combining Practice Plus*. Book 1. Newton, Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.
- Schumaker, J. B. & Sheldon, J. (1985). *The Sentence Writing Strategy: Instructor's Manual*. Lawrence, KS: The University of Kansas.