

Chapter 13: Politics

Grammar as Rhetoric and Style

Subordination in the Complex Sentence

Subordination is the use of a subordinating conjunction to make the meaning of one clause dependent on another clause. One way that writers build longer sentences that are logical and clear is through subordination. Although there are different types of subordination, involving both clauses and phrases, we are focusing here on the **complex sentence** — that is, a sentence formed by an **independent clause** and a **dependent clause** that begins with a subordinating conjunction.

Just because a clause is subordinate does not mean that what it says is unimportant. The ideas in both clauses contribute to the meaning of the sentence. It is the job of subordination to tell us how those ideas are related. This ability to connect ideas is the reason subordination is so effective; by using *because*, you tell your reader that one thing causes another; by using *when*, you indicate that two things are related chronologically. Thus, you can show the logical relationships in a rather lengthy sentence so that the length in no way impedes clarity.

Note the relationship between the dependent and independent clauses in the following sentence:

When a nimble Burman tripped me up on the football field and the referee (another Burman) looked the other way, the crowd yelled with hideous laughter.

— GEORGE ORWELL

In this example, Orwell uses the subordinate clause to establish the chronology of events that lead to the main action of the sentence — that is, his being laughed at by the crowd.

Subordinating conjunctions (underlined below) can be classified by the relationships they indicate:

Contrast or Concession: *although, even though, though, while, whereas*

Although the book was not entirely free of the stereotypes of contemporary British colonial writing, it was in some ways remarkably advanced for its time.

— CHINUA ACHEBE

Cause and Effect or Reason: *because, since, so that*

Because neither island was well suited to agriculture, the company in 1733 purchased St. Croix — a larger, flatter, and more fertile island, 40 miles south — from France.

— NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, CHRISTIANSTED: OFFICIAL MAP AND GUIDE

Condition: *if, once, unless*

I can think of no one objection that will possibly be raised against this proposal unless it should be urged that the number of people will be thereby much lessened in the kingdom.

— JONATHAN SWIFT

Time: *when, whenever, after, before, as, once, since, while*

I had committed myself to doing it [killing the elephant] when I sent for the rifle.

— GEORGE ORWELL

Punctuation

Correct punctuation adds clarity to longer sentences. The rule of thumb is: use a comma to set off a subordinate clause that opens a sentence. Each of the opening clauses in the preceding examples from Achebe and the National Park Service — one starting with *although*, another with *because* — is set off with a comma. Note that the comma comes not after the subordinating conjunction but after the entire clause. If you read the examples aloud, you'll probably find yourself naturally pausing at the end of the subordinate clause.

When the subordinate clause follows the independent clause, it gets a little trickier. Most of the time there is no comma at all because the dependent clause is necessary to the meaning of the sentence; this is called a *restrictive clause*. The sentence you just read is an example: the clause “because the dependent clause is necessary . . .” is essential to the meaning of the sentence. In some cases, however, the dependent clause adds information but is not necessary to the meaning of the sentence. For example:

It is left only to those on the margins to keep the flame of introspection alive, although the destruction of culture is often so great that full recovery is impossible.

—CHRIS HEDGES

Here the subordinate clause is not essential to the meaning of the sentence, so it is set off with a comma; this is called a *nonrestrictive clause*.

Keep in mind that a dependent clause cannot stand alone. When you're using a dependent clause, be careful not to end up with a *sentence fragment* — that is, a dependent clause followed by a period. To correct a sentence fragment, simply attach it to the independent clause.

Rhetorical and Stylistic Strategy

One strategy is to use subordination to blend short sentences into more graceful, longer sentences. Consider the following two sentences:

It was still August. The air already had the smell of October, football season, piles of yellow-red leaves, everything crisp and clean.

Both are complete sentences. As readers, we understand them easily. The relationship between the two is temporal. But consider the difference with the addition of a subordinating conjunction:

Though it was still August, the air already had the smell of October, football season, piles of yellow-red leaves, everything crisp and clean.

—TIM O'BRIEN

Here the conjunction *though* indicates a contrast between the summer months and the smell of the air. Combining the two short sentences does not make the resulting sentence more difficult to understand; on the contrary, the longer sentence is easier to understand because it leaves nothing to chance.

A writer has to determine which clause should be dependent and which should be independent in a complex sentence. Although one clause is just as important as the other, the independent clause usually carries the most force, so you should put the idea you want to emphasize in an independent clause. Sometimes the choice is obvious because the relationship is chronological or cause and effect, but other times either clause could be independent. Consider the following example:

Although my classmates and I would not have known it at the time, the London publishing house of Methuen had brought out the year before, in 1951, a little book titled simply *West Africa*.

—CHINUA ACHEBE

What would the difference in effect have been if Achebe had written the following?

Although the London publishing house of Methuen had brought out the year before, in 1951, a little book titled simply *West Africa*, my classmates and I would not have known it at the time.

Both examples indicate that the relationship between the two clauses is one of contrast. But the second example puts the emphasis on Achebe and his classmates when, in fact, the publication of *West Africa* is the main event in the sentence and deserves more emphasis; the publication of the book affected Achebe and friends, not vice versa.

Where to place the subordinate clause is another choice a writer must make. For instance, examine the dependent clause in the following example:

Though it was still August, the air already had the smell of October, football season, piles of yellow-red leaves, everything crisp and clean.

—TIM O'BRIEN

The dependent clause (“Though it was still August”) could have been put at the end of the sentence or even in the middle. Why do you think O’Brien placed it at the beginning? Perhaps placing the dependent clause in the middle of all those descriptive phrases would have muddled the sentence, making it difficult to decipher. As for putting it at the end, consider this example:

The air already had the smell of October, football season, piles of yellow-red leaves, everything crisp and clean, though it was still August.

The effect is different. In the original sentence, O’Brien signals at the outset that something is unusual: “Though it was still August.” However, if this clause appears at the end of the sentence, it gets buried. By the time we’ve read about the smell of things associated with autumn, the fact that “it was still August” seems beside the point.

Exercise 1

• EXERCISE 1

Combine each of the following pairs of sentences into one sentence, using subordination. You might shift the order of the sentences, and in some cases you may have to change the wording slightly. Be sure to punctuate correctly.

1. The investigators have gathered and analyzed all the evidence. We may expect a full report.
2. Tom had listened to the music of Bruce Springsteen for years. He had no idea a live performance could be so exciting.
3. The team has suffered its share of injuries this year. It could have improved its performance by giving Flynn more time on the field.
4. We will not be able to resolve this situation amicably. We must be willing to leave our prejudices at the door.

5. The crime rate has escalated near the mall. Many people have stopped shopping at the mall.
6. Rose Henderson has the qualifications to become a first-rate senator. Most of us knew she did not have a good chance to be elected. We worked hard on her campaign.
7. Lan Cao is a law professor at the College of William and Mary. She is also the author of the novel *Monkey Bridge*.
8. I'm not feeling well today. I plan to leave the office early.
9. Apple offered a free iPod with every MacBook. Sales of the MacBook improved dramatically.
10. The affluent population of Dallas, Texas, is increasing steadily. Housing prices are rising beyond what someone with a middle-class salary can afford.
11. We all realize the necessity for increased security. We need to protect our civil liberties.
12. Thousands of vacationers travel to our national parks in search of solitude and fresh air. Other people prefer the excitement of casinos and amusement parks.

Exercise 2

EXERCISE 2

Identify each subordinate clause in the following sentences, and explain its effect. All are direct quotations from the readings in this chapter.

1. When I saw England for the first time, I was a child in school sitting at a desk. — JAMAICA KINCAID
2. If now as I speak of all this I give the impression of someone on the outside looking in, nose pressed up against a glass window, that is wrong. — JAMAICA KINCAID
3. Although the old man never confronted me about it, there was one occasion when he came close to forcing the whole thing out into the open. — TIM O'BRIEN
4. Once people are dead, you can't make them undead. — TIM O'BRIEN
5. If he charged, I could shoot; if he took no notice of me, it would be safe to leave him until the mahout came back. — GEORGE ORWELL
6. Therefore if we are to compensate the young man for the loss of his glory and of his gun, we must give him access to the creative feelings. — VIRGINIA WOOLF

7. As the 19th century wore on, St. Croix became little more than a marginal sugar producer. — NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
8. If I have unjustly wrestled a plank from a drowning man, I must restore it to him though I drown myself. — HENRY DAVID THOREAU
9. A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority. — HENRY DAVID THOREAU
10. There will never be a really free and enlightened State, until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly. — HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Exercise 3

EXERCISE

Analyze the use of subordinate clauses in the following passages. Pay particular attention to how the writer varies sentence patterns.

1. I suppose we can all differ as to the exact point where good writing becomes overwhelmed by racial cliché. But overwhelmed or undermined, literature is always badly served when an author's artistic insight yields place to stereotype and malice. And it becomes doubly offensive when such a work is arrogantly proffered to you as your story. Some people may wonder if, perhaps, we were not too touchy, if we were not oversensitive. We really were not. And I have a somewhat unusual reason for saying so. — CHINUA ACHEBE
2. All this was perplexing and upsetting. For at that time I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing and the sooner I chucked up my job and got out of it the better. Theoretically — and secretly, of course — I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British. . . . Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism; ask any Anglo-Indian official, if you can catch him off duty. . . .
 Afterwards, of course, there were endless discussions about the shooting of the elephant. The owner was furious, but he was only an Indian and could do nothing. Besides, legally I had done the right thing, for a mad elephant has to be killed, like a mad dog, if its owner fails to control it. Among the Europeans opinion was divided. The older men said I was right, the younger men said it was a damn shame to shoot an elephant for killing a coolie, because an elephant was worth more than any damn Coringhee coolie. And afterwards I was very glad that the coolie had been killed; it put me legally in the right

and it gave me sufficient pretext for shooting the elephant. I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool.
— GEORGE ORWELL

3. In wartime the state seeks to destroy its own culture. It is only when this destruction has been completed that the state can begin to exterminate the culture of its opponents. In times of conflict authentic culture is subversive. As the cause championed by the state comes to define national identity, as the myth of war entices a nation to glory and sacrifice, those who question the value of the cause and the veracity of the myths are branded internal enemies.
— CHRIS HEDGES

4. A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight. If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood. This is, in fact, the definition of a peaceable revolution, if any such is possible. If the tax-gatherer, or any other public officer, asks me, as one has done, "But what shall I do?" my answer is, "If you really wish to do anything, resign your office." When the subject has refused allegiance and the officer has resigned his office, then the revolution is accomplished.
— HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Exercise 4

• EXERCISE 4

In a national magazine that features writing on cultural and political subjects, find a passage that is effective in its use of subordination. Discuss how each subordinate clause works to support the speaker's rhetorical purpose.