

Learning Punctuation Through Pattern Recognition: Complex Sentences and Subordinate Clauses

by Ellen Drake, CMT, FAAMT

The first installment of “Learning Punctuation through Pattern Recognition—Compound Sentences” appeared in the Spring 2004 issue of Perspectives. (See www.hpisum.com, Free Downloads, for a copy of the previous article. Answers to the exercise accompanying that article appear at the end of this article.) This series of articles will show students how to recognize punctuation patterns to improve punctuation skills. With practice, students will also increase transcription speed. In order to receive benefit from these articles, students must know and easily recognize the parts of speech, especially nouns, verbs, conjunctions, and adverbs and be able to identify subject and predicate (verb). If the student is unable to do that, a remedial English course is recommended. Students may want to post the pattern boxes and dependent marker boxes near their work areas to reinforce their skills as they transcribe.

Studying patterns in sentence structure enables medical transcriptionists to predict what’s coming next and in doing so to punctuate “on the fly.” There is generally little or no time on the job to go back over one’s work for the purpose of finessing one’s punctuation of a document. In the article on compound sentences, the pattern boxes helped the reader identify coordinating conjunctions, conjunctive adverbs, and transitional phrases in order to punctuate a compound sentence correctly. Another key element in recognizing patterns in compound sentences was the identification of a subject and a complete verb following the conjunction. In this article, we will look at subordinate clauses and complex sentences. In doing so, we will distinguish between essential or defining clauses and nonessential or nondefining clauses.

Definition of a Subordinate Clause

A subordinate (dependent) clause is a group of words containing a subject (which may be understood rather than explicitly stated) and a verb. A subordinate clause cannot stand alone; such a clause is dependent on the remainder of the sentence (an independent clause) for completeness of thought. A subordinate clause followed by a period is a sentence fragment, which is not the same as a clipped sentence (a subject for a later article). A subordinate clause functions as a single part of speech—a noun, an adjective, or an adverb—and is introduced by a subordinating conjunction, also called a dependent marker. See the box for a list of subordinating conjunctions which may introduce subordinate clauses.

A subordinate clause may precede or follow a main clause. Identifying several patterns of sentence structure, in

Subordinating Conjunctions	
after	so that
although	than
as	that
because	though
before	till
even if	unless
even though	until
how	when
however (rare)	whenever
if	where
in order that	whereas
once	wherever
provided that	whether
rather than	while
since	why

addition to memorizing the list of dependent markers, will aid in recognizing dependent clauses.

Complex Sentences

A complex sentence contains a main (independent) clause and at least one subordinate (dependent) clause.

Pattern 1



Example:

Because the patient had lost a considerable amount of blood at the scene of the accident, a transfusion was begun by the EMTs en route.

Pattern 2



Example:

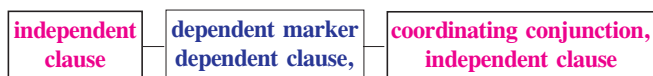
A transfusion was begun by the EMTs en route because the patient had lost a considerable amount of blood at the scene of the accident.

Note that when the subordinate clause precedes the main clause, it is followed by a comma; when it follows the main clause, no comma is used. An exception to this punctuation pattern is with relative clauses, where punctuation is dependent on whether the clause is essential or nonessential. Relative clauses will be discussed later.

Compound-Complex Sentences

A compound-complex sentence contains at least two main clauses and at least one subordinate clause. The subordinate clause may precede or follow either (or both) of the main clauses.

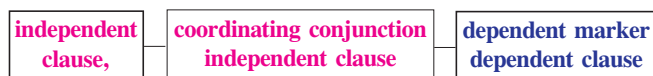
Pattern 3



Example:

She was hesitant to go home because there was no help, and she is discharged to Florida Living Nursing Care.

Pattern 4



Example:

A biopsy forceps was placed through the second puncture site suprapubically, and biopsy was taken of the anterior uterine serosa where suspected endometriosis was felt to be present.

Note that patterns 4 and 5 may be combined with a dependent clause preceding and/or following either or both independent clauses.

Example:

Because there was no help at home, she was hesitant to be discharged home, so she is discharged to Florida Living Nursing Care where she will remain until she is able to care for herself.

The above example contains three dependent clauses (those starting with *because*, *where*, and *until*) and two independent clauses and is much more reflective of the way doctors actually dictate.

Relative Clauses

A relative clause is a specific type of dependent clause introduced by a relative pronoun. See relative pronoun box. Relative clauses may be considered essential (defining) or nonessential (nondefining). When we say that a clause is essential or defining, we mean that if it is removed from the sentence, some necessary information will be lost or the sentence

Relative Pronouns

that	whom
which	whose
whichever	whosever
who	whomever
whoever	

will be *grammatically incorrect*. Generally, an essential clause modifies a general noun, and a nonessential clause modifies a *specific* noun. Look at the two examples below.

The patient whom you sent over to my office on Wednesday never showed up.

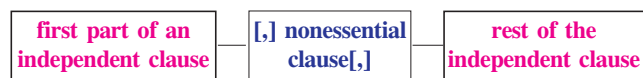
Mr. Goodweather, whom you asked me to see in consultation, is cleared medically for orthopedic surgery.

In the first example, *patient* is a general noun. Without more specific information, it could refer to any number of people. Therefore, the dependent clause *whom you sent over to my office on Wednesday* is essential in order for the reader to know *which* patient. In the second example, Mr. Goodweather is a specific noun. We really don't need that additional information about him to know who he is, so the clause set off with commas is nonessential. Looked at another way, an essential clause makes a general noun *more specific*. It identifies, specifies, or particularizes a noun which, by itself, does not carry much information.

Like other dependent clauses, relative clauses may precede a main clause, follow a main clause, or interrupt a main clause. If a relative clause precedes a main clause, it is followed by a comma. If it follows a main clause, it will require a comma if it is nonessential. If it interrupts a clause, it should be set off by commas if nonessential. No punctuation is needed before an essential relative clause that follows a main clause nor should an essential relative clause that interrupts a sentence be set off by commas.

Pattern 5

This pattern includes an independent clause with an embedded nonessential clause.



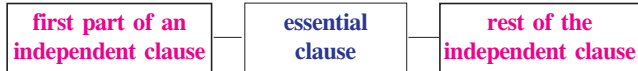
Example:

This 2-month-old male infant, **who is a known patient to our Lutz office**, was admitted on July 11, 2001.

The *who* clause is providing additional information but it is not essential to identification of the patient (the Lutz office handles lots of patients).

Pattern 6

This pattern includes an independent clause with an embedded essential clause.



Example:

Patients whose exacerbations of acute asthma require repeated admissions require frequent and careful followup to ensure compliance with treatment.

Without the clause beginning with *whose*, we do not know which patients require followup. The above discussion of essential and nonessential clauses could be applied to essential and nonessential phrases as well.

Test for Subordinate Clause

- It has at least one subject and one predicate.
- It is introduced by a subordinating conjunction or by a relative pronoun.
- When it stands alone, it does not express a complete thought or form a complete sentence.

Zero That-Clauses

When the relative pronoun *that* is the object of the verb within its relative clause, it is often omitted, even in formal speech and writing.

We then mobilized the structures that we had previously marked with dye.

We then mobilized the structures we had previously marked with dye.

On his next visit the patient is to bring in all the medicines that he is currently taking.

On his next visit the patient is to bring in all the medicines he is currently taking.

Note that these examples are clear and correct with or without the relative pronoun.

Misplaced Clauses

It is all too common in medical dictation for a dependent clause to get separated from the word it's modifying. Usually, misplaced clauses appear at the end of a sentence. When it's not possible or feasible to recast the sentence and put the clause in its proper place, it should be preceded by a comma to indicate that it is *not* modifying the immediately preceding word.

There were some minor areas in the lower cervix and lower fundus, which were consistent but not diagnostic of filmy synechiae.

The dependent clause modifies *areas*, not *fundus*, and so is misplaced; thus, the comma before *which*. The sentence could be recast as follows:

There were some minor areas which were consistent with but not diagnostic of filmy synechiae in the lower cervix and lower fundus.

Placed after the noun being modified, the relative clause becomes essential. Although many of us were taught that an essential relative clause should begin with *that*, the trend is to accept *which* clauses as essential or nonessential. I would transcribe as dictated.

Difficult to Classify

Sometimes, it's difficult to know to which sentence a dependent clause belongs. With which sentence would you include the italicized clauses in the following excerpts which were dictated with little or no auditory clues to where one sentence ended and the other begins?

He returned to work at the factory with the approval of his physician and with restrictions on exposure to TDI, asbestos, carbon black, and other noxious inhalants *although he experienced no symptoms* while at work, he had chest pain and dyspnea that night, severe enough to require medical consultation.

There is extremely dense, sheetlike retroareolar dysplasia present bilaterally *although there is no mammographic finding specific for malignancy* the presence of this severe dysplasia significantly increases patient's risk for developing malignancy.

I have had students who repeatedly punctuate a dependent clause as though it were a complete sentence. However, when I had the student read her transcript aloud to me, she would read right past the period to complete the sentence. With medical dictation, it's easy to "lose track" of a sentence and where the doctor is taking it. Until their skills improve, students should be encouraged to make a separate proofing run through their work just to check punctuation. With the above guidelines and those in the previous article on compound sentences, students should be able to scan for the "markers" that help to identify sentence structure and avoid comma splices, run-ons, and fragments.

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Quiz on Subordinate Clauses

Underline the subordinate clauses in the following examples. If the clause is a relative clause, underline it twice. Some sentences may not contain a subordinate or relative clause.

1. She was draped appropriately and a retractor placed within the vagina where the cervix was grasped with a tenaculum and the uterus sounded to 7 cm.
2. The infant's major problem was hypoglycemia which was readily corrected using D10W IV fluids.
3. She is now asked to withdraw from the Disney program, Project Freedom, in lieu of being expelled for battery while being enrolled in the program.
4. It took several days before the glucose became normoglycemic.
5. The Cohen-Eder cannula was placed, and after we regowned and regloved and after draining the bladder with a Foley catheter, the abdomen was draped appropriately.
6. The uterus was irregular with two large grape-sized fibroids on the anterior uterine fundus, a 4-cm intraligamentary fibroid on the right side near the uterine cervix and lower uterine segment, and a couple of smaller fibroids which were present in a subserosal fashion.
7. Both tubes were normal but were extended up above the pelvic brim where the superior portions of the ovaries were positioned by short utero-ovarian ligaments.
8. Intravenous gentamicin and Ancef were used for antibiotic prophylaxis pre- and perioperatively because of the patient's suspected history of mitral valve prolapse.
9. The endometrial cavity was not particularly irregular although the lower uterine segment was definitely narrowed.
10. He feels, although the final nuclear reports are not back, that she is very stable and she probably does not have severe coronary artery disease and that there is no reason she cannot be discharged at this time.
11. If there are any problems, she can always call us, and we will be glad to see her until Dr. Allison Hanley is available again.
12. For his hyponatremia, the first day, he was given normal saline at 125 cc per hour because he appeared dehydrated; however, his sodium the next day had not corrected, and the patient was worked up, getting a serum osmolality which was 277 and below normal, normal being 80 to 285.
13. The patient is going to be discharged in the a.m. provided that his family can make appropriate arrangements for extended care for him.
14. A CEA was ordered, before the histologic diagnosis was known, and was 1.2.
15. Mr. Doe reported that his pain was intermittently severe.
16. Mr. Doe received a transfusion of leukocyte-depleted single-donor platelets because of presumed aspirin-induced platelet dysfunction.
17. A CT scan of the thoracic spine revealed the interval development, since the previous study from June 1 of a reported isodense fluid collection corresponding to the epidural abnormality noted on the MRI scan, interpreted as most consistent with a chronic epidural hematoma.
18. The left lower extremity was ordered to be elevated; however, heat was not applied because of the sensory loss associated with Mr. Doe's spinal cord compression.
19. She is known to be a 33-year-old female, gravida 9, para 2-0-0-7-2 with estimated date of confinement of July 7, 2001, who was admitted prematurely due to macrosomia and gestational diabetes which was controlled by diet.
20. On examination, she is in stable condition as we mentioned already.
21. The patient, while in the emergency room, remained quite combative and, hence, polypharmacy ingestion was suspected.
22. The patient is a 16-year-old adolescent who, on the evening of admission, went to a fence place which is a few blocks from her house.
23. CT brain was done, which was normal.
24. The patient also underwent a pregnancy test that was negative.

Prior approved for 1 CEC in the MT Tools category. Grade your quiz using the answer key provided and attach a copy of the completed, graded quiz to your CE Summary Form when you submit it at the end of your cycle.

25. Since the patient was awake enough, oral feeds were started and IV fluids were weaned.
26. The patient was seen by Dr. Allen, of Psychiatry, who felt that the patient just needed counseling, and there was no further intervention felt to be needed.
27. By June 12, Mr. Barker had moved his bowels, so the surgical drain was removed.
28. Daily monitoring of the PT and INR proved Mr. Doe to be extremely sensitive to Coumadin, requiring frequent dose reductions and even interruptions.
29. Because the infant has not been gaining very well, although he is gaining now, we are sending him home on 22-calorie formula which is what we were feeding him in the NICU.
30. While in the hospital, the patient underwent an echocardiogram, and this was interpreted by Dr. James C Smith.

For answers to the Subordinate Clauses quiz, see the next page.

Answers to Previous Exercise on Compound Sentences

“Learning Punctuation Through Pattern Recognition: *Compound Sentences*,” *Perspectives*, Spring 2004. Available under Free Downloads at <http://www.hpisum.com/>

Which of the following sentences are compound sentences? Identify the subject, verb, and conjunction, *if* present, in each sentence. Is the conjunction a coordinating conjunction, a conjunctive adverb, or a transitional phrase? Which sentences belong in pattern 2, with no conjunction? Which sentences are *not* compound sentences? Internal punctuation has been omitted; you will need to supply a comma or semicolon as needed. (The simple subject is underscored, and the verb is in bold face type. Note punctuation in brackets.)

1. The patient **stated** that her headaches have been present off and on for many years[,] and they **are** unrelieved with the usual remedies.

(Compound sentence with coordinating conjunction.)

2. The patient **says** he voids 15 times daily[;] he **voids** every 2 hours at night.

(Compound sentence without a conjunction; the *he voids* in the first independent clause is the subject and verb of a clause acting as the object of the verb *says*; an omitted but understood *that* introduces the clause.)

3. The patient **has** a past history of cholecystitis with subsequent cholecystectomy[;] otherwise[,] her past medical history **is** negative.

(Compound sentence with conjunctive adverb.)

4. The patient’s insurance **requires** a second opinion[,] so she **was seen** by Dr. Jacobson[,] who concurred.

(Compound sentence with a coordinating conjunction; the *who concurred* is a clause modifying Dr. Jacobson. Be careful of the conjunction *so*; sometimes when it’s just a substitute for *as well* or *in addition to*, a careful writer would use a semicolon. For example: The patient’s parents are both well; so are his brothers and sisters.)

5. There **was** no clinical evidence of fracture[;] however[,] because of continued pain[,] an x-ray **was ordered**.

(Compound sentence with conjunctive adverb; *there* at the beginning of the sentence is an expletive and not the subject.)

6. Total cholesterol **was elevated**[;] HDL[,] however[,] **was high**[,] and LDL within normal limits.

(Compound sentence without a conjunction. The comma and conjunction after *high* are not introducing another clause, although a verb is certainly understood. The comma, therefore, is added to emphasize the contrast of the HDL being high and the LDL within normal limits. Omission of this comma is not a serious error, if error at all. Note that *however* is just interrupting the thought, not introducing a clause.)

7. The dog **was removed** from the house with no change in the patient’s symptoms[;] indeed[,] there **was** some progression of his symptoms.

(Compound sentence with the second clause being introduced by a transitional word *indeed*.)

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Answers to Quiz on Subordinate Clauses

Subordinate clauses are in **red** and the relative clauses in **blue**.

1. She was draped appropriately and a retractor placed within the vagina **where the cervix was grasped with a tenaculum** and the uterus sounded to 7 cm.
2. The infant's major problem was hypoglycemia **which was readily corrected using D10W IV fluids**.
3. She is now asked to withdraw from the Disney program, Project Freedom, in lieu of being expelled for battery while being enrolled in the program.
[There is no subordinate clause in this sentence.]
4. It took several days **before the glucose became normoglycemic**.
5. The Cohen-Eder cannula was placed, and **after we regowned and regloved** and after draining the bladder with a Foley catheter, the abdomen was draped appropriately.
[Note the difference between the subordinate clause *after we regowned and regloved* and the phrase beginning *after draining*. There is no subject in the latter and *draining* is a gerund functioning as a noun.]
6. The uterus was irregular with two large grape-sized fibroids on the anterior uterine fundus, a 4-cm intraligamentary fibroid on the right side near the uterine cervix and lower uterine segment, and a couple of smaller fibroids **which were present in a subserosal fashion**.
7. Both tubes were normal but were extended up above the pelvic brim **where the superior portions of the ovaries were positioned by short utero-ovarian ligaments**.
8. Intravenous gentamicin and Ancef were used for antibiotic prophylaxis pre- and perioperatively because of the patient's suspected history of mitral valve prolapse.
[This sentence does not have a subordinate or relative clause; there is no subject or verb following *because*.]
9. The endometrial cavity was not particularly irregular **although the lower uterine segment was definitely narrowed**.
10. He feels, **although the final nuclear reports are not back, that she is very stable** and **[that] she probably does not have severe coronary artery disease** and **that there is no reason she cannot be discharged at this time**.
[This sentence has numerous subordinate clauses. A subordinate clause interrupts the verb in the independent clause and its objects—the three subordinate clauses that follow. An omitted *that* before *she probably* makes it appear that there are only two direct object clauses, but there are actually three. The *and* could be replaced with a comma after *stable*.]
11. **If there are any problems**, she can always call us, and we will be glad to see her **until Dr. Allison Hanley is available again**.
12. For his hyponatremia, the first day, he was given normal saline at 125 cc per hour **because he appeared dehydrated**; however, his sodium the next day had not corrected, and the patient was worked up, getting a serum osmolality **which was 277 and below normal**, normal being 80 to 285.
13. The patient is going to be discharged in the a.m. **provided that his family can make appropriate arrangements for extended care for him**.
14. A CEA was ordered **before the histologic diagnosis was known** and was 1.2.
15. Mr. Doe reported **that his pain was intermittently severe**.
16. Mr. Doe received a transfusion of leukocyte-depleted single-donor platelets because of presumed aspirin-induced platelet dysfunction.
[There is no subordinate clause in this sentence.]
17. A CT scan of the thoracic spine revealed the interval development, since the previous study from June 1, of a reported isodense fluid collection corresponding to the epidural abnormality noted on the MRI scan, interpreted as most consistent with a chronic epidural hematoma.
[This sentence does not contain a subordinate clause.]
18. The left lower extremity was ordered to be elevated; however, heat was not applied because of the sensory loss associated with Mr. Doe's spinal cord compression.
[There is no subordinate clause in this sentence.]
19. She is known to be a 33-year-old female, gravida 9, para 2-0-0-7-2 with estimated date of confinement of July 7, 2001, **who was admitted prematurely** due to macrosomia and gestational diabetes **which was controlled by diet**.
20. On examination, she is in stable condition **as we mentioned already**.
21. The patient, while in the emergency room, remained quite combative and, hence, polypharmacy ingestion was suspected.
[There is no subordinate clause in this sentence.]

22. The patient is a 16-year-old adolescent **who**, on the evening of admission, **went to a fence place which is a few blocks from her house**.
 [There are two relative clauses here—*who went to a fence place* is modifying *adolescent* and *which is a few blocks from her house* is modifying *place*.]
23. CT brain was done, **which was normal**.
24. The patient also underwent a pregnancy test **that was negative**.
 [Here *that* is functioning as a pronoun with the entire clause modifying *test*. In sentences above where the *that clause* is in red, the clause is functioning as a direct object.]
25. **Since the patient was awake enough**, oral feeds were started and IV fluids were weaned.
26. The patient was seen by Dr. Allen, of Psychiatry, **who felt that the patient just needed counseling**, and there was no further intervention felt to be needed.
 [The relative clause *who felt* is modifying Dr. Allen, and the subordinate clause *that the patient just needed counseling* is the object of the verb *felt*. It is difficult to say whether the clause beginning “there was no further . . .” is an independent clause or a second dependent zero that-clause and the second object of the verb *felt*. If a zero that-clause, no comma would be placed after counseling.]
27. By June 12, Mr. Barker had moved his bowels, so the surgical drain was removed.
 [This is a compound sentence; there is no subordinate clause.]
28. Daily monitoring of the PT and INR proved Mr. Doe to be extremely sensitive to Coumadin, requiring frequent dose reductions and even interruptions.
 [There is no subordinate clause in this sentence.]
29. Because the infant has not been gaining very well, **although he is gaining now**, we are sending him home on 22-calorie formula **which is what we were feeding him in the NICU**.
 [The *what* clause is functioning as the object of the verb *is*, so it is a subordinate clause while the *which is* clause is relative.]
30. While in the hospital, the patient underwent an echocardiogram, and this was interpreted by Dr. James C Smith.
 [There is no subordinate clause in this sentence.]



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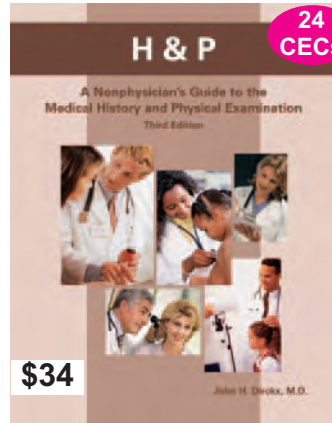
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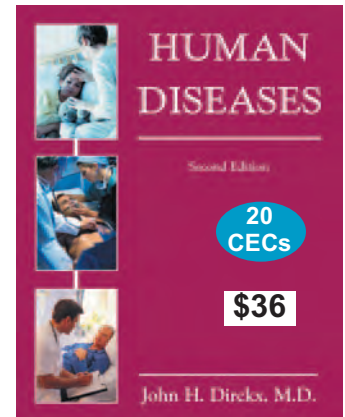
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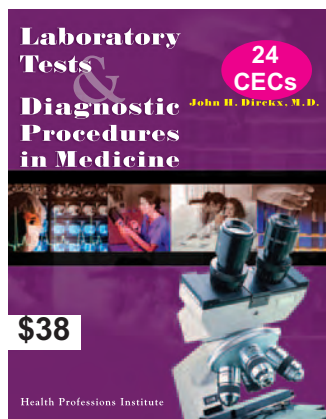
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