

## PHRASES AND CLAUSES

### WHAT ARE PHRASES AND CLAUSES?

- ✍ **Phrases and clauses are groups of related words that serve as building blocks of sentences on a larger scale than parts of speech. A clause contains both a subject and a verb whereas a phrase does not.** Understanding phrases and clauses and knowing how to recognize them help writers create varied sentences and avoid problems such as run-on sentences, fragments, and punctuation errors.

### HOW CAN WE IDENTIFY PHRASES AND CLAUSES?

- ✍ **A phrase, which generally consists of multiple parts of speech, behaves as a unit like a single part of speech.** In the following examples, note how phrases take on the roles of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. (Phrases that begin with a preposition—called “prepositional phrases”—can fulfill various functions, particularly as adjective phrases, adverb phrases, or part of noun phrases.)

- Noun phrases name a person, place, thing, or idea.

*Buying a home can be a stressful ordeal.*

*My elegant Aunt Ida adores that mangy one-eyed mutt of hers.*

- Verb phrases express action or state of being.

*We may have been mistaken about the car's reliability.*

*The Sampson twins will be traveling in Belize all next month.*

- Adjective phrases describe nouns.

*The bird, a beautiful yellow grosbeak, is chirping gleefully.*

*The tree on your left is a popular haven for such species.*

- Adverb phrases describe verbs, adjectives, other adverbs, or even whole sentences.

*Because of the recent rainfall, our vegetable garden is thriving.*

*I wish all people could live with music in their hearts.*

- ✍ **Clauses fit into two main categories: independent and dependent.**

- An independent clause may stand alone as a complete sentence because it contains a subject and a verb and forms a complete idea. A sentence made of one independent

clause is called a “simple sentence.” A sentence made of two or more independent clauses is called a “compound sentence.” Note that these distinctions rely on the particular combination of subject (underlined) and verb (double-underlined) rather than the length of the sentence.

*[Uncle Jay's two Siamese kittens kept me awake all night long with their constant mewing and wrestling.]*

*[I sing.] and [she dances.]*

- A dependent clause contains a subject and a verb but does not form a complete idea.

*[When Laney scratched off the final number on the lottery ticket]*

Do you feel the suspense? A dependent clause needs an independent clause to finish the thought and become a complete sentence. This type of sentence is called a “complex sentence.” A sentence with at least one dependent clause and at least two independent clauses is called a “compound-complex sentence.”

*[When Laney scratched off the final number on the lottery ticket,] she remembered the reason for her nickname, Luckless Laney.*

*The movie [that I saw last weekend] wasn't nearly as good as the popcorn.*

*Mr. Wu will not visit tomorrow [unless he can get his car repaired this afternoon].*

## TRY IT!

For the following passage, draw a set of brackets around each clause. Label independent clauses IC and dependent clauses DC. Underline all phrases.

*Joe was always hard up, always hustling to make a buck. Over the years he had learned how to do almost any job. He knew everything about building houses; he knew how to mix mud and straw just right to make strong adobes that would not crumble. Though unlicensed, he could steal and lay his own plumbing, do all the electric fixtures in a house, and hire five peons at slave wages to install a septic tank that would not overflow until the day after Joe died or left town. Given half the necessary equipment, he could dig a well, and he understood everything there was to understand about pumps. He could tear down a useless tractor and piece it together again so niftily it would plow like balls of fire for at least a week before blowing up and maiming its driver; and he could disk and seed a field well and irrigate it properly. “Hell,” Joe liked to brag, “I can grow sweet corn just by using my own spit and a little ant piss!”*

John Nichols, *The Milagro Beanfield War*