

Sentence Building and Punctuation Made Simple

English has two basic ways of combining words into groups: phrases and clauses

Phrases are centred around nouns (*in the van, by early morning*).

Clauses are centred around verbs (*she runs the marathon; when he saw the ruins*).

All sentences are constructed from two types of **clauses**.

1. The **main, principal, or independent clause**. It contains a subject (noun), a predicate (verb), and expresses a complete thought:

She decided to walk to the park.

(subject) (verb) (= complete thought)

2. The **subordinate or dependent clause**. It also contains a subject and a verb but does not express a complete thought. Subordinate clauses often begin with words like *since, while, although, despite*, etc.:

Because it was a sunny day...

(subject) (verb) (= incomplete thought)

Combining clauses is what sentence building is all about. Joining a **subordinate** clause with a **main** clause requires only a comma:

✓ *Because it was a sunny day, she decided to walk to the park.*
(subordinate clause) (main)

The tricky part comes when two **main** clauses are joined together. Punctuation options include:

- ✓ A period: *It was a sunny day. She decided to walk to the park.*
- ✓ A semi-colon: *It was a sunny day; she decided to walk to the park.*
- ✓ A comma with a linking word (coordinating conjunction): *It was a sunny day, so she decided walk to the park.*

Other coordinating conjunctions are *and, but, yet, or, nor* and *for*.

- X **Comma splices: Do not** use a comma to join two main clauses in a sentence: e.g., *It was a sunny day, she decided walk to the park*. A comma is too weak a form of punctuation, and the resulting error is called a **comma splice**.
- X **Run-on sentence:** Joining two main clauses with *no* punctuation is called a **run-on sentence**.

Both are considered to be major sentence errors.

A special case is when two main clauses are combined, and the second one begins with *however* (or other conjunctive adverbs like *therefore, thus* or *nevertheless*). A semi-colon must be used; a comma is too weak, and will create a comma splice:

✓ *It was raining; however, she decided to walk to the park.*

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