

The Clause Test

What joins two parts of a sentence? Ask: **how many could stand alone as a sentence?**

Two independent clauses

Period (new sentence)

Semicolon

Comma + **FANBOYS**: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so

Colon, when the second explains the first

One independent, one dependent

Comma

Or **nothing**, when the dependent clause comes second

Colon, before a list or explanation

- ✓ A **comma alone** between two independent clauses is a comma splice: always wrong
- ✓ **Dependent clauses** open with words like because, although, before, after, who, which
- ✓ Every sentence needs a **finite verb**: "The students walking down the hallway" is not a sentence

Punctuation

- ✓ **Handlebar rule**: an interrupter takes a matching pair — two commas, two dashes or two parentheses; lift it out and the sentence must still work
- ✓ A single dash may open a phrase that **ends the sentence**
- ✓ **Never one mark** between a subject and its verb, or a verb and its object
- ✓ **When in doubt, take it out**: no comma unless you can name its reason; none between a title and a name ("German anthropologist Dorothea Bleek")
- ✓ **Semicolon**: joins independent clauses, or separates list items that already contain commas
- ✓ **Colon**: after a complete clause, before a list, an explanation or emphasis
- ✓ Same meaning, several correct options? Choose the **clearest and shortest**

Modifiers

- ✓ An opening modifier describes **the noun right after the comma**
- ✓ Ask "**Who?** Show me!": "Growling and snapping its jaws, **the dog** bit the man"

Subject—verb agreement

- ✓ **Find the subject**: cross out everything between it and the verb
- ✓ The subject is **never in a prepositional phrase**: the **leader** of the teams **is**
- ✓ An **-s makes a verb singular**: it challenges, they challenge
- ✓ Collective and "one" nouns are singular: a **pack**, this **kind**, a **collection**, **each**, **everyone**
- ✓ **A and B** is plural, unless it is one idea: spaghetti and meatballs **is**
- ✓ Verb before the subject? Read on to find it: there **are** several **reasons**

Pronouns and possession

- ✓ A pronoun matches its **antecedent** in number: the otter ... **its** playful persona
- ✓ **Possessive nouns** take an apostrophe: the student's books, the players' hopes
- ✓ **Possessive pronouns never do**: its, whose, theirs; **it's** = it is, **who's** = who is
- ✓ Plural not ending in s: **'s** — the children's, the women's
- ✓ **No apostrophe for a plain plural**: visit the Johnsons
- ✓ **Who** for people; **that** and **which** for things

Verb tense

- ✓ **Match the passage's tense** unless a time marker says otherwise
- ✓ Markers that decide it:
 - **since** → present perfect: Corbett **has become** a leading voice since 2020
 - **before** an earlier past event → past perfect: Planck **had become** dean
 - **by the time** (future) → future perfect: preparations **will have been** completed
 - **if** + past perfect → **would have**: if she had known, she would have acted
- ✓ An **-ing form alone** can never be the main verb