

PHRASES AND CLAUSES

Phrases and clauses are groups of words found within a sentence. These groups each express an idea, which may be complete or incomplete. Being able to identify phrases and clauses will help with writing and punctuating complete sentences.

Phrases: A phrase is a group of words that does not have a subject and verb. A phrase cannot therefore be a complete idea or a complete sentence by itself.

Several types of phrases are used in English. These phrases will come in several forms and serve several functions in a sentence.

A few examples are shown below:

We waded in the stream.
(The phrase is used as an adverb.)

The doll by the bed is very old.
(The phrase is used as an adjective.)

Going swimming is good exercise.
(The phrase forms the subject.)

To visit his family was the purpose of the trip. (The phrase again serves as the subject.)

The man playing the guitar is my neighbor. (The phrase is used as an adjective.)

Clauses: A clause is a group of words that has a subject and verb.

Two types of clauses are used in English:

1. Independent clause: a clause which can stand alone as a complete sentence because it is a complete thought.
2. Dependent clause: a clause which cannot stand alone as a complete sentence because it is not a complete thought. It must be used with an independent clause. Dependent clauses begin with words that make fragments (examples: when, who, that, if, because).

Examples are shown below:

[When we saw him,] he was running toward the river.
dependent independent
(not a sentence) (a complete sentence)

The manager said [that there was nothing] [that he could do.]
independent dependent dependent

The woman [who answered the door] was not my aunt.
dependent

“The woman was not my aunt” is the independent clause.

The engine steamed and hissed slowing to a stop.
independent---only one subject and verb set

The wind blew harder, and the trees creaked.
independent independent---two subject-verb sets