

Student Scope

Learning Punctuation Through Pattern Recognition

by Ellen Drake, CMT

This is the first in a series of articles that will show students how to recognize punctuation patterns to improve punctuation skills. With practice, it will also help increase transcription speed. It is assumed that students know and can easily recognize the parts of speech, especially nouns, verbs, conjunctions, and adverbs and can identify subject and predicate (verb). If the student is unable to do that, a remedial English course is recommended. Students may want to cut out or copy the pattern box on the opposite page and post it near their work areas to reinforce their skills as they transcribe. The next article will address subordinate clauses.

The experienced medical transcriptionist (MT) inserts punctuation and omits incorrectly dictated punctuation “on the fly.” There is little time on the job to transcribe a report and go back later to add missing punctuation or correct errors. Learning to recognize sentence structure and punctuation through pattern recognition can help students master this sometimes-elusive skill.

Compound Sentences and Coordination

A complete sentence may also be called an independent clause. A clause is a group of closely related words that contain a subject and verb. An *independent* clause can stand alone and expresses a complete thought. Examine the following examples. The subjects and verbs are underlined. *Verb* in this article is used to mean the verb that belongs with the subject. There may be more than one verb in a sentence, but choose the one that belongs with the subject and ignore the others.

We then deployed the graft in the usual fashion.

But the patient’s blood pressure was extremely labile.

Notice that the second example sounds a little strange because it begins with a conjunction. We want to ask, “What is the *but* there for?” While it is sometimes acceptable for experienced writers to begin sentences with coordinating conjunctions, students should concentrate on punctuating standard constructions and not on breaking the rules. Remove the *but* and you have a complete sentence (independent clause) that expresses a complete thought.

The patient’s blood pressure was extremely labile.

Pattern 1

Combine the independent clauses, and you have a compound sentence—in this case, two independent clauses joined by what’s known as a *coordinating conjunction*. Coordinating conjunctions are connectors used to join two independent clauses of usually (but not always) equal weight. A comma is always used before a coordinating conjunction joining two independent clauses. So now, we’re looking at a pattern that we can easily recognize.

We then deployed the graft in the usual fashion, but the patient’s blood pressure was extremely labile.

See the opposite page, “Punctuating Patterns of Compound Sentences,” for a diagram of pattern 1. Note that the coordinating conjunctions are *all* short words of 2 or 3 characters only. A mnemonic used by some to remember the coordinating conjunctions is FANBOYS (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so).

Pattern 2

Another type of coordination is just like the above, but it joins two *closely related* independent clauses *without* a conjunction. Generally, one clause states the cause or the result of what is taking place in the other clause. A *semicolon* takes the place of the conjunction. In the following example, the subjects and verbs are underlined. The word *presumably* is an introductory word for the second clause, not a conjunction.

We could not see the left anterior descending; presumably, it was intramyocardial.

We have already gone through her laundry products; these have been either eliminated or changed.

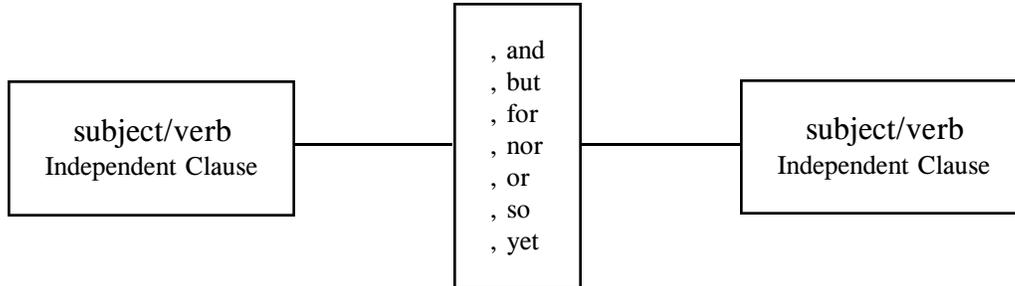
The patient does not smoke; he quit 2 years ago.

See pattern 2 in the figure “Punctuating Patterns for Compound Sentences.” You can see the cause and effect relationship of the two independent clauses in the above examples. If you are uncertain whether the sentences are closely related enough to warrant a semicolon, a period between two independent clauses, which are not joined by any kind of conjunction, is perfectly acceptable.

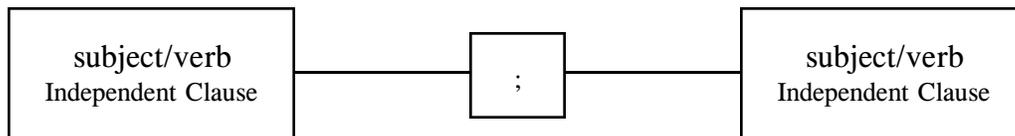
(continued)

Punctuating Patterns of Compound Sentences

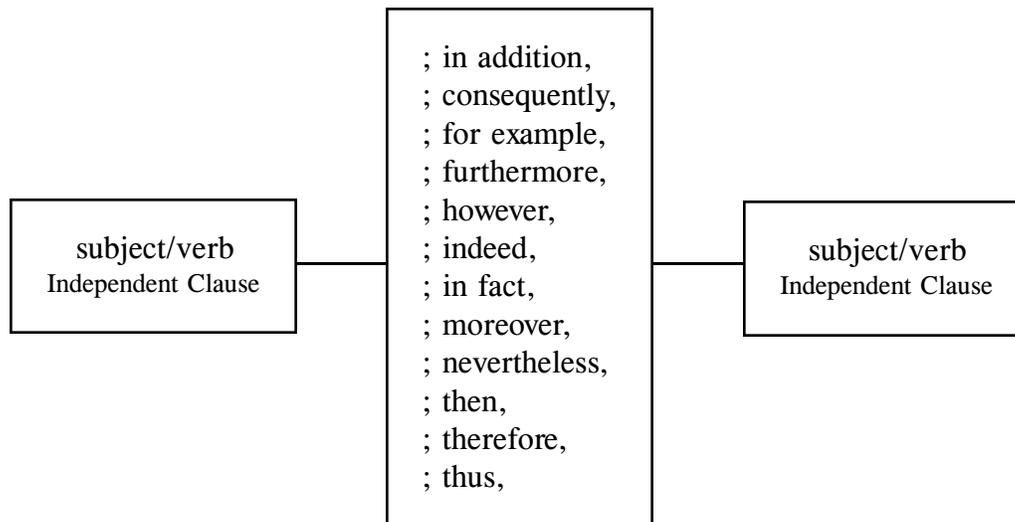
Pattern 1: Independent clauses joined by coordinating conjunctions.



Pattern 2: Independent clauses joined by a semicolon.



Pattern 3: Independent clauses joined by conjunctive adverbs and transitional phrases.



Additional conjunctive adverbs include *also*, *anyway*, *besides*, *finally*, *hence*, *incidentally*, *instead*, *likewise*, *meanwhile*, *moreover*, *next*, *nonetheless*, *otherwise*, and *still*.

Additional transitional phrases include the following: *after all*, *as a result*, *at any rate*, *at the same time*, *by the way*, *even so*, *in other words*, *in the second place*, *on the contrary*, *on the other hand*.

Pattern 3

The final pattern for compound sentences is the joining of two independent clauses by an adverbial conjunction (conjunctive adverb) or a transitional phrase. A semicolon precedes the conjunctive word or phrase, and a comma follows it. The most frequently used adverbs are *however* and *therefore*, but there are others, which are listed in the conjunction box for pattern 3 on the previous page. Note that it is increasingly acceptable, especially in informal writing, to begin a sentence with these types of adverbs, thus acceptable to use a period instead of a semicolon.

Locate the subject and verb of each clause in the sentences below.

The patient was having significant atrial arrhythmias; consequently, I elected not to pursue any further attempts at treatment.

The Aneurex graft was then deployed just beneath the renal arteries and into the lumen of the Guidant graft; thus, we had a graft-into-graft deployment.

We then obtained what we thought would be a completion arteriogram; however, this showed continued filling of the aneurysm.

See figure, “Punctuating Patterns for Compound Sentences,” for pattern 3.

Cautionary Note

You must be sure that each clause is an independent clause (both containing subject and verb and expressing a complete idea), because both coordinating conjunctions (pattern 1) and conjunctive adverbs or transitional phrases (pattern 3) can be used in sentences without introducing an independent clause. The following examples are NOT compound sentences.

Finally, attention was turned to identifying the bleeding site at the distal anatomical snuffbox. (The word *finally* is still a transitional phrase but here serves as a bridge between one paragraph and the next.)

The donor lungs were slightly smaller in size but an amazingly close match. (There is no subject or verb after *but*.)

The colostomy was not opened at this time but was left for later. (There is a verb but no subject after *but*.)

The valve did, however, seat very nicely. (There is only one subject, *valve*, and one verb, *seat*.)

We therefore elected to take her to surgery. (There is only one subject and one verb.)

Notice in the third example, *however* is enclosed in commas. In the last example, *therefore* does not interrupt the flow of the sentence, so commas are unnecessary.

Many sentences in medical reports are not as simple as the examples above. As often as not, additional words and clauses, some of them having verbs, may make it difficult to identify the independent clauses. To simplify the process, ignore these intervening words and try to isolate just the independent clauses.

Try These Exercises

Choose 1-3 full pages of a transcribed report (or a magazine article if a report is not available). Use different-colored highlighting pens to highlight the subjects, verbs (predicates), and conjunctions of compound sentences. Identify the conjunctions as coordinating conjunctions, conjunctive adverbs, or transitional phrases. Verify that the punctuation used is correct by comparing the sentences to the patterns on the previous page. Exchange your work with a friend and check each other's choices. Discuss any differences of opinions and ask your instructor for help in any unresolved disputes.

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 patient stated that her headaches have been present off and on for many years and they are unrelieved with the usual remedies.

The patient says he voids 15 times daily he voids every 2 hours at night.

The patient has a past history of cholecystitis with subsequent cholecystectomy otherwise her past medical history is negative.

The patient's insurance requires a second opinion so she was seen by Dr. Jacobson who concurred.

There was no clinical evidence of fracture however because of continued pain an x-ray was ordered.

Total cholesterol was elevated HDL however was high and LDL within normal limits.

The dog was removed from the house with no change in the patient's symptoms indeed there was some progression of his symptoms.

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