

Lesson 1

Punctuating the Basic English Sentence

Luckily, the basic English sentence needs little punctuation. When we line up our subject, verb, object, and adverbs in the usual order, no punctuation is needed. Here are some typical English sentences:

Bob Jones bought a computer yesterday at Best Buy.
Bob missed his class last night because of a late bus.
Bob works carefully when he is in the chemistry lab.

Adverbs such as *yesterday* and *carefully* are moveable. When we move the adverbs of these sentences in order to change the emphasis, we still need no punctuation most of the time.

Yesterday Bob Jones bought a computer at Best Buy.
Yesterday at Best Buy Bob Jones bought a computer.
Because of a late bus Bob missed his class last night.
Last night Bob missed his class because of a late bus.

Some writers put commas in some of these sentences to get special emphasis. They do it more frequently if the phrases are longer.

Yesterday, Bob Jones bought a computer at Best Buy.
Yesterday at Best Buy, Bob Jones bought a computer.
Because of a late bus, Bob missed his class last night
Last night, Bob missed his class because of a late bus.

Yet none is required by convention or for clarity.

Establishing Boundaries: Moving Verb-Modifying Clauses to the Front

Sometimes when we rearrange sentences, we have clarity problems. The following sentences are perfectly clear:

*My dogs were under my feet **while** I was cooking.*
*The horse fell down **while** I was riding.*

In these sentences, the boundary between *feet* and *while* and between *down* and *while* is clearly marked by the subordinating conjunction *while*. There is no confusion and no necessity for marking the boundary between them with a mark of punctuation.

But if we move the adverbial clause to the front, we cause the reader to do a double-take. He will almost certainly misconstrue the meaning of the sentence and have to reread it.

While *I was cooking my dogs were under my feet.*

While *I was riding the horse fell down.*

This confusion can easily be cleared up by the placement of a comma where the adverbial clause joins the main clause. It is needed because there is no longer a subordinating conjunction to mark the boundary. It has been moved to the front.

While *I was cooking, my dogs were under my feet.*

While *I was riding, the horse fell down.*

Because of the confusion caused in some sentences by the lack of a comma here, it has become a convention of English punctuation to set off such initial adverbial clauses with a comma even when there would be no confusion without one. The following sentences are clear but not punctuated conventionally.

While *Bill was working in the garage Sue was mowing the yard.*

Although *I got the job I still could not pay my bills.*

Editors of almost all publications insist that the writers they publish follow the convention of placing a comma after these introductory clauses.

Any writer may learn to punctuate initial adverbial clauses conventionally by having a list of words like *while* and *although* ready to hand. I call this particular kind of subordinating conjunction a VMCI. This stands for Verb Modifying Clause Introducer, Type 1. Here is a list of many of them.

Single Words: after, although, as, because, before, if, once, provided, providing, since, so, supposing, though, unless, until, when, where, whereas, while

Compounds: as often as, as if, as soon as, as though, at the place that, at the time that, during the time that, in addition to the fact that, in case, in case that, in hopes that, in order that, even though, every time that, in the event that, now that, provided that, providing that, so that, supposing that, within the period of time that

A few of these structure words sometimes appear with a *that* and sometimes without one.

Provided that *I can get a ride, I will be at the party.*

Provided *I can get a ride, I will be at the party.*

So that *I could take a trip, I saved money.*
So *I could take a trip, I saved money.*

When using the two VMCI's of motive *in order that* and *so that*, writers may choose to omit *in order* and *so*.

In order that *he might win, he cheated.*
So that *he could win, he cheated.*

And they will get a rather formal variant which means the same thing.

That *he might win, he cheated.*

There are a few horribly overlong VMCI's which I suggest that writers avoid. Here is a fairly complete list of the commonly used ones.

along with the fact that, as a result of the fact that, because of the fact that, despite the fact that, due to the fact that, in contrast to the fact that, in spite of the fact that, owing to the fact that, plus the fact that, with the fact that, in addition to the fact that

Editors must recognize them so that they can suggest shorter replacements. A comma will still be required after the initial clause should one of these ever be used. Notice this last sentence that I wrote.

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This is a case where a writer has a clause modifying a verb without a VMCI. Instead, we have the auxiliary verb moved to the front of the clause. If the clause is moved to the front, it is conventional to separate it from the following main clause with a comma.

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Exercise 1

Is a comma needed at the place or places underlined? Explain why or why not. Answers to this and all other exercises are in Appendix 1.

1. Bob finished his work in the lab early.
2. Bob may get home early if he can get to the bus on time.

3. If I see him _ I will give him your message.
4. Tim stayed at the lab late _ so that he could finish his work.
5. So that he could finish his work _ Tim stayed at the lab late.
6. As soon as Tim gets here _ I will give him your message.
7. When he got home _ I told him what you said.
8. In addition to the fact that he failed to put out the dog _ he didn't turn off the lights.
9. I think that he will be back later _ although he said that he wouldn't.
10. Now that I am ready to go _ my ride still isn't here.
11. So I would be eligible to play baseball _ I studied every afternoon.

Establishing Boundaries: Putting Adverbial Clauses after the Subject

So far, I have moved the adverbial clauses to the front, but the clauses can also be placed between the subject and verb. I don't usually recommend this placement if the clauses are exceptionally long. When adverbial clauses are after the subject, commas conventionally are placed on each side of them. This is one of the two primary functions of a comma, setting off one structure from another.

*Bob, **if** he gets the message, will surely respond.*

*Tom, **since** he has been at home, has recovered quickly.*

Exercise 2

Is a comma needed at the place or places underlined? Explain why or why not.

1. Hal _ when he gets here _ will tell you what happened.
2. Hal will tell you _ what happened _ if you ask him.
3. If you ask him _ Hal will tell you what happened.
4. As I was going into the building _ Hal was coming out.
5. Although I like Margie _ I don't believe that she can be trusted.
6. Trees _ when they are planted in the summer _ will need lots of water _ if it doesn't rain.

Adverbial Infinitive Phrases of Motive

Another structure which modifies verbs is the infinitive phrase of motive. These infinitive phrases serve the same purpose as the clauses introduced by *so that* and *in order that* which I illustrated earlier.

*Bob saved money **so that** his son could go to college.*
***So that** his son could go to college, Bob saved money.*
*I saved money **so that** I could go to college.*
***So that** I could go to college, I saved money.*

*Bob saved money **in order for** his son **to** go to college.*
*Bob saved money **for** his son to go **to** college.*
*I saved money **in order** to go **to** college.*
*I saved money **to** go to college.*

The infinitive phrase of motive always begins with *in order, for, or to*. When these phrases are moved to the front of the sentence or placed after the subject, they are punctuated just like the comparable clause.

In order for his son to go to college, Bob saved money.

For his son to go to college, Bob saved money.

In order to go to college, I saved money.

To go to college, I saved money.

Bob, in order for his son to go to college, saved money.

Bob, for his son to go to college, saved money.

I, in order to go to college, saved money.

I, to go to college, saved money.

Exercise 3

Is a comma needed at the place or places underlined? Explain why or why not.

1. To get to Austin from here _ I sometimes take Post Road.
2. I should wash my hair more often _ so that it will look better _ when I go out on a date.
3. In order to make enough money to pay tuition _ he has to work at two jobs.
4. The school_ in order to attract more basketball fans_ is giving discounts on the tickets.
5. He went to the store _ to buy milk.

Sometimes the adverb clause which has been moved to the front has another structure placed before it.

When I get there, I will fix the leak.

He thinks that when I get there, I will fix the leak.

I retained the comma because the relationship between the adverb clause and the clause that follows has not changed.

It is possible to leave out the *that* in this sentence, but it is unwise to do so because doing so causes confusion about which verb the *when* clause is modifying.

He thinks when I get there, I will fix the leak.

Sometimes a careless writer will put the *that* in the wrong place.

He thinks when I get there that I will fix the leak.

I have seen still other writers mistakenly put two *thats* in and leave out the comma.

He thinks that when I get there that I will fix the leak.

Exercise 4

Is a comma needed at the place or places underlined? Explain why or why not.

1. He said that when he quit working at the grocery store _ he would take a vacation.
2. I hope _ you remember _ where you put the tools.
3. In order to speak proper French _ I had to learn that if the verb was in the future tense _ I should join the whole infinitive with the future endings.
4. *I know that when Bob is playing _ every game leads to an argument.*
5. He suspects that I will win the match _ if he serves poorly.
6. He thinks that if I whisper _ I am lying.
7. I know that Bob Jones when he is serving well can beat me.
8. I think that he will be back later_ although he said that he wouldn't.

Occasionally an initial adverbial prepositional phrase can cause difficulty in comprehension for a reader. Notice what happens when the following prepositional phrase is shifted to the front and no comma follows.

*The barn looked bad **in spite of** his cleaning.*

In spite of his cleaning the barn looked bad.

This last sentence must have a comma in order to make the sentence clear.

In spite of his cleaning, the barn looked bad.

In spite of the poor clarity in that sentence there is no consistency of agreement about placing commas after opening prepositional phrases. I have a choice. I can punctuate my last sentence as I did, or I can punctuate it with a comma.

In spite of the poor clarity in that sentence, there is no consistency of agreement about placing commas after opening prepositional phrases.

Many handbooks says that commas should be placed after longer introductory prepositional phrases, but I do not find that good writers follow this practice with any consistency.

Here is a list of common prepositions:

Single Word: aboard, about, above, across, after, against, along, amid, among, around, at, barring, before, behind, below, beneath, beside, besides, between, beyond, by, concerning, despite, down, during, except, excepting, for, from, in, inside, instead, into, like, near, of, off, on, outside, over, past, plus, regarding, respecting, save, saving only, through, throughout, till, to, toward, towards, until, up, upon, with, within, without

Compounds: à la, along with, as a result of, aside from, because of, by dint of, by means of, by the use of, by way of, contrary to, due to, for the sake of, in addition to, in advance of, in case of, in conjunction with, in consideration of, in contrast to, in hope of, in hopes of, in lieu of, in place of, in reference to, in regard to, in spite of, in the direction of, in the event of, in the fashion of, in the manner of, in the middle of, in the style of, instead of, on account of, on behalf of, out of, outside of, owing to, through the use of, together with, with respect to, with the exception of

The lists I have provided in this chapter are of great importance to any writer or editor hoping to recognize the structures modifying verbs so that they can punctuate the basic sentence clearly and conventionally.