

# Academic Writing and Subordination

In academic writing you are judged by your ability to analyze, organize and articulate ideas. These tasks, analysis, organization, and articulation, are thought processes that you can't really isolate from the writing process, and in many ways, you don't discover what your thoughts are on a particular topic until you start writing.

Typically, however, inexperienced writers fail to make these thought processes explicit, assuming that they are obvious to the reader. The trouble is they are not, as you will see below. In academic writing, where clear thinking is a top priority, you have to make your thought processes explicit in the sentence structures so that the way you write your sentences supports the point you are trying to make in your analysis and argument. If you don't, your writing will look like this:

Modern students may often have heard the term rhetoric used. They probably do not have a clear idea of what it means. Their uncertainty is understandable. The word has acquired many meanings.

These four sentences are grammatically correct, but they just state facts in isolation. There is no analysis of the facts and no relationship between them. The minute you establish a logical relationship between them, a line of thought emerges. This line of thought comes about because some ideas are subordinated to others in a logical way.

If you do use subordination, your writing will look more like this:

**Although** modern students may often have heard the term rhetoric used, they probably do not have a clear idea of what it means. Their uncertainty is understandable **because** the word has acquired many meanings. - Edward P. J. Corbett

The two words in bold are **subordinating conjunctions**. They are positioned at the start of a subordinate clause and show the kind of **logical relationship** that exists between the main clause and the subordinate clause. The first subordinating conjunction, **although**, establishes a concession, and the second, **because**, states a reason. Usually the main idea goes into the main clause, and the supporting idea goes into to the subordinate clause.

Although you may not consciously be aware of it, you use subordinating conjunctions all the time when you speak and when you write. In fact, in what you have read so far there are many examples of subordination, for example, in the first sentence in this paragraph.

**Although** you may not consciously be aware of it, you use subordinating conjunctions all the timewhen you speak and when you write.

## Definitions

A **subordinate or dependent clause** is introduced by a subordinating conjunction and always has a subject and a verb/predicate: **when** you write (subordinating conjunction. + subject + verb and what follows the verb).

A **main clause** has a subject and a verb/predicate and has no conjunction **that** subordinates it to another clause. It is independent and can stand on its own **whereas** a subordinate clause is always connected to a main clause.

## Words Denoting Logical Relationships (Subordinating Conjunctions)

**When** you become conscious of the need for subordination and learn to use it correctly, you give yourself an important tool to improve your writing. To help you, I have started putting all subordinating conjunctions in bold.

The first step in the process of learning to use subordination is to identify the subordinating conjunctions and their meaning. Subordinating conjunctions signal many different logical relationships.

## *Time*

- after
- as
- as long as
- as soon as
- once
- before
- since
- until
- when
- whenever
- while

## *Concession and Contrast*

- although
- even though
- though
- whereas

## *Reason or Cause*

- because
- since
- as

## *Condition*

- as if
- as though
- if
- even if
- provided that
- unless

## *Purpose or Result*

- in order that
- lest
- so
- that

## *Choice*

- rather than
- whether

## *Place*

- where
- wherever

## *Relative Pronouns*

(not exactly subordinating conjunctions but pronouns that connect the subordinate clause to a specific noun in the main clause.)

- who, whom, whose (used about people)
- which (used about things)
- that (used about both if the clause is essential to the main clause)

## **Examples of Subordination**

The subordinate clauses are in bold:

- The noise **that kept bothering me** came from the water softener.
- A cynic is a man **who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing**. -Oscar Wilde
- **If you work and have small children**, you must juggle conflicting responsibilities.
- The store closed **when the owner died**.
- Sarah was happy **because she had just passed her exam**.
- **Although he had studied hard**, he did not pass the exam.
- I worked as a waitress for a year **so that I could earn money for university**.

## Co-ordination

The second step in the process of learning to use subordination is to recognize its opposite: **co-ordination**. **If** subordination means that one clause is reduced to secondary importance compared to another, coordination means **that** two clauses, put side by side, are of equal importance and weight. You can join main clauses in two ways:

Use a comma and one of the seven *coordinating conjunctions*, here shown in italics: *and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet* (A.B. Fonsy, for short)

The economists considered budget cuts, *and* the politicians thought of votes.

Or link the two main clauses with a semicolon:

The economists considered budget cuts; the politicians thought of votes.

A semicolon signals to the reader **that** there is a connection between the two clauses, *but* it is up to the reader to see it. No conjunction spells it out in detail. In fact, a semicolon makes people think, *so* it is both a suggestive and elegant way of adding depth and detail to your writing.

Another variation on the same idea is to use a *conjunctive adverb* between the two clauses.

The economists considered budget cuts; *however*, the politicians thought of votes.

You will notice **that** the conjunctive adverb is followed by a comma in exactly the same way as an adverb at the beginning of a sentence is followed by a comma.

Initially, we planned cuts to the budget.

Some of the most common conjunctive adverbs are:

*however, moreover, nevertheless, similarly, finally, then, therefore, thus, consequently*

## Sentence Fragments

The third step in the process of learning to use subordination is to recognize the kind of writing error **that** can crop up when you use it: **sentence fragments**.

A sentence fragment is an incomplete sentence, punctuated **as if** it were complete. Sometimes a sentence fragment occurs **when** either the subject, verb, or both are missing from the sentence, but most often it occurs **when** a subordinate clause is punctuated **as if** it were a main clause.

**X** I use the spell check function on my computer all the time. **Because** I am a bad speller.

A subordinate or dependent clause punctuated as a main clause is considered a fragment **because** to be complete, it "depends" on the independent clause and must therefore not be separated from it.

√ I use the spell check function on my computer all the time **because** I am a bad speller.

√ **Because** I am a bad speller, I use the spell check function on my computer all the time.

The best way to avoid writing fragments is to memorize the seven coordinating conjunctions listed above. **If** a conjunction is not one of the seven coordinating ones, you will know **that** it must be a subordinating conjunction; this will remind you not to punctuate the dependent clause **as if** it were an independent one.

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