Sentence Combining (2): Subordination

Once you have mastered the basics of correct usage in written English, you will want to express yourself in increasingly complex ways. Subordination is a method of combining independent clauses with dependent clauses using sentence connectors. This approach results in a complex sentence that can improve the formality and sophistication of your writing style. Subordination techniques for writing complex sentences are:

1. Use a subordinating conjunction
2. Use a relative pronoun

1. Use a subordinating conjunction

Subordinating conjunctions are used in complex sentences. They are part of the clause that follows and make the clauses dependent. Clauses that begin with subordinating conjunctions are sometimes called **adverbial clauses**. Subordinating conjunctions indicate the following relationships:

Time — after, as soon as, as long as, before, ever since, as, while
Causality — because, since
Concession and Contrast — although, even though, whereas, while
Condition — if, provided that, unless
Purpose — so that, in order that
Place — where
Result — so that
Comparison — than

- If the **dependent clause** appears first, use a comma to separate the two clauses. No comma is required if the **independent clause** appears first.

Examples | **Subordinating conjunction** | **Dependent clause** (adverbial clause) | **Independent clause**

✓ **Even though** procrastination can be quite a natural response to facing some onerous tasks**,** it can cause anxiety for students faced with assessment tasks.
(COMMA IS USED BECAUSE THE SENTENCE BEGINS WITH THE DEPENDENT CLAUSE)

✓ Procrastination can cause anxiety for students faced with assessment tasks **even though** it can be quite a natural response to facing some onerous tasks.
(COMMA IS NOT USED BECAUSE THE SENTENCE BEGINS WITH THE INDEPENDENT CLAUSE)

✗ Procrastination can cause anxiety for students faced with assessment tasks**, X even though** it can be quite a natural response to facing some onerous tasks.
(INCORRECT USE OF COMMA BECAUSE THE SENTENCE BEGINS WITH THE INDEPENDENT CLAUSE)

✓ **As** students who procrastinate often show a lack of prioritising skills, training in time management strategies is often helpful.
(COMMA IS USED BECAUSE THE SENTENCE BEGINS WITH THE DEPENDENT CLAUSE)

✓ Training in time management strategies is often helpful **as** students who procrastinate often show a lack of prioritising skills.
(COMMA IS NOT USED BECAUSE THE SENTENCE BEGINS WITH THE INDEPENDENT CLAUSE)

✗ Training in time management strategies is often helpful**, X as** students who procrastinate often show a lack of prioritising skills.
(INCORRECT USE OF COMMA BECAUSE THE SENTENCE BEGINS WITH THE INDEPENDENT CLAUSE)

NOTE: Not all complex sentences can be inverted.
✓ **YES** The average temperature was much higher **than** it was last year.
✗ **NO** **Than** it was last year, the average temperature was much higher.

2. Use a relative pronoun

Relative pronouns are used in complex sentences. They are part of the clause that follows a noun or noun group and they make the clause dependent. Clauses that begin with relative pronouns are sometimes called **relative clauses** or **adjectival clauses**. Use a relative clause to give more information about a noun or pronoun.

To refer to people — who, whose, and whom
To refer to animals and/or things — which or that

NOTE: 'which' introduces a non-restrictive (non-essential) clause and that introduces a restrictive (essential) clause. 'Which' is usually preceded by a comma while 'that' is not.

Examples	**Relative pronoun**	**Dependent clause**	**Independent clause**

Students **who** lack self-awareness of their study behaviours are more likely to suffer from procrastination habits.

- **Placement of the adjectival clause**

Because a relative clause appears immediately after the noun or pronoun it modifies, it is frequently **embedded in the independent clause**. Study the following examples carefully. The relative clause is in italics.

✓ A student *who lacks confidence and fears failure* will often be unable to accomplish a task successfully.

✗ A student will often be unable to accomplish a task successfully X *who lacks confidence and fears failure*. X
(X WRONG POSITION IN THE SENTENCE—'WHO' MUST BE NEXT TO THE WORD TO WHICH IT REFERS.)

- **Non-restrictive clauses (punctuate with commas)**

You will notice that a comma appears before and after some adjectival clauses. The rule is to use a comma before and after a relative clause when the information it provides does not identify the noun it modifies, but rather adds further characterisation to it. These clauses are called **non-restrictive or non-defining clauses**.

✓ This student, who attends all the classes**,** suffers from procrastination when faced with assignments.
(COMMAS ARE USED—THE RELATIVE CLAUSE IS NOT ESSENTIAL TO THE MEANING OF THE REST OF THE SENTENCE.)

✓ Excessive procrastination**,** which is task avoidance**,** can cause poor performance.
(COMMAS ARE USED—THE RELATIVE CLAUSE IS NOT ESSENTIAL TO THE MEANING OF THE REST OF THE SENTENCE.)

- **Restrictive clauses (do not punctuate with commas)**

Relative clauses essential to defining the noun it modifies are called **restrictive or defining clauses** and commas are not used. In these examples, removal of the relative clause would change the overall meaning of the sentence.

✓ Students who fail to submit assignments by the set date will be penalised.
(COMMAS ARE NOT USED—THE RELATIVE CLAUSE IS ESSENTIAL TO DEFINE WHAT KIND OF STUDENTS.)

✓ The fundamental technique that most successfully solves procrastination is the use of time management strategies.
(COMMAS ARE NOT USED—THE RELATIVE CLAUSE IS ESSENTIAL TO DEFINE THE TECHNIQUE.)

- **Avoid overuse of relative clauses**

Overuse of relative clauses results in wordiness. Many relative clauses can be reduced. Compare the following examples:
✓ Students who fail to submit assignments by the set date will be penalised.
✓ Students failing to submit assignments by the set date will be penalised.
✓ The fundamental technique that most successfully solves procrastination is the use of time management strategies.
✓ The fundamental technique for successfully solving procrastination is the use of time management strategies.