

The nature of the information in a sentence

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(a) Types of sentences

A sentence can be an independent clause, or can be formed by combining clauses, usually with the addition of a linking word or phrase. A clause is a grammatical structure in which several components of meaning are brought together to form a message. The verb is the essential element of any clause.

Simple sentences contain a single clause:

- We knew each other well.
- Have you got the time?
- They drove to Hastings.
- I spoke to her mother.

However, many sentences have more than one clause, so are not simple sentences:

- Sam found his teddy bear
- and climbed back into bed
- where he pulled the blankets up around his ears,
- closed his heavy eyes,
- and fell asleep.

Clauses can be combined in different ways to make different kinds of sentences: compound, complex, and compound-complex.

Compound Sentences

Compound sentences consist of two or more independent clauses i.e., each is capable of standing on its own and conveying a message. Each has equal status and provides equally important information. These clauses may be linked with connective words or phrases such as: "and", "but", "or", "yet", "so", "and so", "and then", "either...or", "neither...nor", "not only...but also".

She ran to school	Independent
and threw her bag down	clause
in the corridor.	Independent
	clause

* "she" has been omitted due to ellipsis. See ellipsis.

Karl went on camp.	Independent clause
but the others stayed at home.	Independent clause
You could ring her at the office.	Independent clause
or try her on her cell phone.	Independent clause

Complex sentences

In complex sentences, there is a clause expressing the main message and another clause (or clauses) which elaborates on the main message in some way. While the main message is independent, the other clause cannot stand on its own: it is dependent.

They smiled	Independent clause
as if they meant it.	Dependent clause
The plant died	Independent clause
because it wasn't watered.	Dependent clause
If the container has a hole in it	Dependent clause
the raspberries will leak all over the bench.	Independent clause

Compound-complex sentences

Compound-complex sentences contain a combination of independent and dependent clauses.

The girls walked out of the shop	Independent clause
and laughed loudly*	Independent clause
as they headed for the car.	Dependent clause

* "they" has been omitted due to ellipsis. See ellipsis.

An elderly man was	Independent
admitted to hospital	clause
after suffering a heart	Dependent
attack	clause
and falling down his	Dependent
stairs.	clause

Compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences as a source of difficulty in comprehension

Students need to know the meaning of the conjunctions and other linking words if they are to appreciate the relationship between the ideas.

Research indicates that many students don't fully recognize these relationships and therefore have difficulty in following the meaning of a text. It has been found for example the conditional "if" is understood by only fifty percent of children at age six; that the meaning of "unless" is often not understood well until after the age of nine; and it is generally not until around twelve years of age that many children comprehend the concessive use of "although".
(Deriwianka, 2005, p.95)

(b) Adding information to a sentence

Embedded clauses, e.g., adjectival clauses. Adjectival clauses provide extra information about the noun.

noun	extra information	
Rodents	introduced by settlers	killed the native birds.

The following is an alternative to using an adjectival clause:

Settlers introduced rodents.

These rodents killed the native birds.

noun	extra information	
Native trees	that block people's views or get in the way of property development	are sometimes poisoned.

The following is an alternative to using an adjectival clause:

- Native trees can block people's views.
- Native trees can get in the way of property development.
- Trees like these are sometimes poisoned.

These types of constructions are often found in simplified text, but students need to gradually develop understanding of how to comprehend and produce sentences with embedded clauses.

Adjectival clauses as a source of difficulty in comprehension

Students need to be able to identify what the adjectival clause is referring to. To do this, they need know:

- How pronouns function (adjectival clauses often begin with a pronoun, e.g., "who", "whose", "which", "that", "where"). These identify what is being referred to.
- Which pronoun is omitted, e.g., "the coat [that] I'm wearing".
- That words other than pronouns are sometimes used, e.g., "introduced by settlers".

- How commas function e.g., in "New Zealanders who don't eat fruit and vegetables will have poor health", the adjectival clause defines which particular New Zealanders are being referred to. But in "New Zealanders, who don't eat fruit and vegetables, will have poor health", the adjectival clause is referring to New Zealanders in general.

Modals

Modal verbs convey a range of judgments about the likelihood of events. There are nine modal verbs: "can", "could", "may", "might", "will", "would", "shall", "should", and "must".

- She might be there.
- You could get there by lunchtime if you hurry.
- You'll hit the roof.
- That must have hurt.

To show a high degree of certainty about the likelihood of events, modal verbs of high modality are used. If we feel tentative about something, we use low modality.

High modality	Medium modality	Low modality
must ought to has to	will should can need to	may might could would

(Derewianka, 2005, p.66)

As well as modal verbs, modality can be expressed through choices of nouns, adjectives, and adverbs.

- Modal nouns: "possibility", "probability", "obligation", "necessity", "requirement"
- Modal adjectives: "possible", "probable", "obligatory", "necessary", "required", "determined"
- Modal adverbs: "possibly", "probably", "perhaps", "maybe", "sometimes", "always", "definitely", "never", "certainly"

Modals as a source of difficulty in comprehension

Students will need to understand modals in order to use the appropriate degree of probability or obligation, especially when using text types that involve making judgments, e.g., narrative texts, and persuading people, e.g., arguments, advertisements.