

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 clause
and threw her bag down in	Independent clause
the corridor.	

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

Karl went on camp.	Independent clause
but the others stayed at	Independent clause
home.	

You could ring her at the	Independent clause
office.	Independent clause
or try her on her cell phone.	

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.

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

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.

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