

Lesson 3.2: Identifying Clauses Using Tag Questions

There's more to say, of course, about verbs, but it makes more sense to come back to them in the context of clauses. Once you've got nouns and verbs, clauses are the obvious next step – they're all you need to make a clause. So, here's a definition: A clause contains a subject, which is a noun phrase, and a predicate, which is a verb phrase.

And here is NOT a (good) definition: a clause (or a sentence – I'll come back this distinction below) is a complete thought. The "complete thought" quip is an old standby, but, I would argue, a useless one.

So clauses can have noun phrase subjects and verb phrase predicates that can be short:

She likes eggplant.

Or long:

The girl with the striped pants who I met yesterday adores eggplant fresh from the garden.

Each of these clauses is made up of a subject (NP) and a predicate (VP), but in the second example, each phrase is simply longer.

A clause is distinct from a sentence since a single sentence can contain multiple clauses.

I like eggs. (one clause, one sentence)

I like eggs, but I don't like bacon. (two independent clauses, one sentence)

I like eggs that are cooked well. (two clauses (one is a relative clause), one sentence)

For the most part, identifying subjects is easy. We all make use of them all the time in our speech and writing, and we all have subconscious knowledge that a subject is a necessary element in a clause. But sometimes we may want to double check for a subject, and a really useful test to help identify a subject is through the use of a **tag question**. We discussed tag questions in Lesson X in the context of auxiliary verbs, but here we focus on the pronouns that occur in the tag questions. You will discover that the pronoun that attaches to the end of a sentence refers back to the subject of the independent clause. (In writing, we set off the tag question with a comma.)

The student could write more quickly, couldn't she?

The pronoun *she* refers back to the subject, *the student*. So, tag questions are useful little questions; they not only turn statements into questions, but they also pick out the subject of the sentence. No matter how long or how short the subject is, the pronoun will refer back to the whole segment:

The student with the really heavy backpack who usually takes the bus should be here soon.

→ The student with the really heavy backpack who usually takes the bus should be here

soon, shouldn't he?

And when there is a subordinate clause, the pronoun in the tag question cannot refer back to that subject, only to the subject of the independent clause – so this is a great way to address writing sentence fragments:

Sue thinks Bob will eat shrimp, doesn't she?

not

*Sue thinks that Bob will eat shrimp, doesn't he?

Even though *Bob* is a subject, it's not the subject of the main/independent clause, so the pronoun in the tag question cannot refer back to it, only to *Sue*. You don't need to get into this yet; however, if you do the activity suggested below, students will surely find subordinate clauses. You might want to use some controlled sentences first if you aren't prepared to deal with all sorts of complex clauses.

Activity: Have students find (from a list of sentences you've created, from their own writing, from books) the subject of each sentence by using tag questions. Make sure they identify the whole noun phrase subject, not just the noun.

When students understand the difference between independent and dependent (or subordinate) clauses, there are lots of applications: learning how to punctuate, how to not write in fragments or run-ons, how to make sure the verb agrees with the subject.