

2.1 Clauses: Identifying Subjects

key words: clause, independent clause, subject, pronouns, case, subordinate clause

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.1a Explain the function of nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in general and their functions in particular sentences. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/1/a>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.1i Produce simple, compound, and complex sentences. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/3/1/i>

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.1f Produce complete sentences, recognizing and correcting inappropriate fragments and run-ons. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/L/4/1/f>

A clause contains a subject, which is a noun phrase, and a predicate, which is a verb phrase. These noun phrase subjects and verb phrase predicates 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)

(In Lesson 5.3 and 5.4, you can learn more about combining such clauses into coordinated clauses, and the varied ways such clauses can be punctuated.)

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 need to double check for a subject (since in most writing, every sentence needs at least one subject), and a really useful test to help identify a subject is through the use of what is called a **tag question**. Tag questions attach to the end of a sentence and use a pronoun that 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 (Lesson 2.3), the pronoun in the tag question **cannot** refer back to that subject, only to the subject of the independent clause:

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*.

Using a book or other text, find the subjects by using tag questions. Identify the whole noun phrase subject, not just the head noun. Discuss your answers in a group.

[Understanding the difference between independent and dependent (or subordinate) clauses is important in learning how to punctuate, how to not write in fragments or run-ons, how to make sure the verb agrees with the subject. Using this test, along with the Subject-Auxiliary Inversion Test in 2.2 will allow students to always be able to identify the subjects in their writing.]