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Complex sentences

A complex sentence has one main clause that can stand alone and at least one dependent clause that cannot. The dependent clause starts with a word such as although, because, when, if, who or which. Complex sentences let you show reasons, contrasts and conditions in one sentence.

What to know

Simple, compound and complex

A clause is a group of words with a subject and a verb. A simple sentence has one clause: Cities are growing. A compound sentence joins two equal clauses with a word such as and, but or so: Cities are growing, and they need more homes.

- *Cities are growing.* · *Cities are growing, and they need more homes.*
- *Cities are growing, and they need more homes.* · *Although cities are growing, many villages are becoming smaller.*

The words that start a dependent clause

Dependent clauses start with a joining word. These words fall into three groups, and learning them by job makes them easier to remember.

- Contrast: although, even though, while, whereas
- Reason: because, since, as
- Time: when, after, before, while, until
- Condition: if, unless, as long as
- Relative: who, which, that, whose, where

Punctuation and word order

When the dependent clause comes first, put a comma after it: Because the road was closed, we took the train. When the main clause comes first, a comma is usually not needed: We took the train because the road was closed.

Avoiding fragments and run-ons

A fragment is a dependent clause written as a full sentence. Although the course was expensive, is a fragment because it needs a main clause. Join it to the previous or next sentence: Although the course was expensive, it was worth the cost.

Build one step at a time

If complex sentences feel hard, build them in steps. Start with a simple sentence: Online learning is popular. Ask why, and add a reason: Online learning is popular because it is flexible. Ask about a limit, and add a contrast: Online learning is popular because it is flexible, although some students feel isolated.

Exercises

1. _____ public transport is cheap, many people still drive.
 - a. Because
 - b. Although
 - c. But
2. Many students struggle with maths _____ they do not practise enough.
 - a. because
 - b. however
 - c. although
3. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) Although the course is expensive, (2) but many students (3) enrol every year.
4. Begin with While. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): her brother / was working. / While / and / she was studying.
5. Correct this by taking out one word: *Although it was raining, but we went out.*
6. The woman _____ lives next door is a doctor.
 - a. which
 - b. who
 - c. whose
7. The report, _____ was published last week, shows rising costs.
 - a. which
 - b. what
 - c. who
8. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) Students who (2) works part-time (3) often find it (4) hard to study.
9. Unless people _____ their habits, the climate will continue to warm.
 - a. will change
 - b. do not change
 - c. change
10. He said _____ he would arrive late.
 - a. that
 - b. what
 - c. which

Practise online, free: hear every example and check your answers at www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/complex-sentences/practice/

IELTS tip. Do not write every sentence as a complex sentence. Mix short and complex sentences, and use a complex sentence when you want to give a reason, a contrast or a condition. Check each one for a main clause and for a comma after an opening dependent clause.

FOR TEACHERS · GRAMMAR

Complex sentences

AIM	Learners build complex sentences with adverbial and relative clauses and punctuate them correctly.
TIME	35 minutes
LEVEL	B1 to B2 (IELTS 5 to 6.5)
MATERIALS	This worksheet, one copy per learner; the free online practice for the audio

Warm-up

Write two short sentences on the board, such as The city is crowded and The city is exciting. Ask learners to join them in as many ways as they can.

Lesson steps

1. Show the three sentence types with the board sentences and label main and dependent clauses.
2. Give learners a table of joining words by function. They write one sentence about their town for each function.
3. Pairs exchange sentences and check them with two questions: Is there a main clause? Is there a comma where needed?
4. Introduce fragments and comma splices with six sentences and let learners fix them.

Extension

Learners rewrite a paragraph of eight short sentences into a mix of simple, compound and complex sentences.

Answer key

1. b) Although. The clauses show contrast, and although introduces the dependent clause. But cannot start a sentence in this pattern.
2. a) because. Because gives the reason. However is not a joining word, and although would show contrast.
3. Part 2: *but many students* → **many students**. After although we do not use but. The main clause begins without a joining word.
4. While she was studying, her brother was working. While starts the dependent clause, and the main clause follows after the comma.
5. Although it was raining, we went out. Use either although or but, not both.
6. b) who. Who refers to people and acts as the subject of lives.
7. a) which. Which refers to things, and the commas show it adds extra information.

8. Part 2: *works part-time* → **work part-time**. Who refers to students, which is plural, so the verb has no s.
9. c) change. Unless already means if not, so the verb is positive and in the present simple.
10. a) that. That introduces a noun clause after said.

Questions learners often ask

What is a complex sentence? It is a sentence with one main clause and at least one dependent clause. The dependent clause starts with a word like although, because, if or who.

Do I always need a comma? Use a comma after a dependent clause that comes first. Usually no comma is needed when it comes second.

Is a longer sentence always better? No. Clear sentences matter more than long ones. Use complex sentences when you need to show a link between ideas.

Can I start a sentence with because? Yes, if you finish the sentence with a main clause. Because the road was closed, we took the train is complete.

Sources

- Carter, R. and McCarthy, M. (2006). Cambridge Grammar of English. Cambridge University Press.
- Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S. and Finegan, E. (1999). Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English. Longman.

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