



# Complex sentences:

## Creating agility and depth in your writing

This guide is intended to provide a starting point for you to approach the teaching of writing in your classroom. It builds on the knowledge learnt in the [other sentence guides](#).

Complex sentences are an important step in enabling students to produce more sophisticated writing. Mastering complex sentences allows students to have greater control when communicating.

### 1. So ... what are complex sentences?

Complex sentences contain one independent clause and one or more dependent clauses. As we have highlighted in the [simple](#) and [compound sentence](#) guides, an independent clause usually makes sense on its own. To make complete sense, it must contain **a subject and a finite verb**. Dependent clauses (also known as subordinate clauses) do not make complete sense on their own. They cannot exist by themselves as they do not form a complete idea. They require an independent clause to form a complete sentence or fully expressed idea and make sense.

### 2. Let's look at dependent clauses

Here are 2 types of dependent clauses that we can use in complex sentences. In the examples below, the annotations illustrate how we can explain to students how dependent clauses are used in complex sentences.

#### 2.1. Adverbial clauses

Adverbial clauses are used to describe or modify the verb in the independent clause or other adverbial clauses. Adverbial clauses can start the sentence or follow the independent clause (they are moveable).

While Darci cleared the table, **the chef was cooking the food.**

[\[Dependent adverbial clause, + independent clause\]](#)

This is the final resource in a suite of guides designed to help teachers explain and demonstrate the fundamentals of writing to their students. The content increases in complexity across the guides, so it is helpful to read them in order. These guides take a functional view of language as it aligns with the Australian Curriculum: English. This means the parts of speech are considered in terms of what they are doing in a sentence, as well as their formal characteristics.

1. [Simple sentences: are not necessarily simple!](#)
2. [Compound sentences: adding interest.](#)
3. [Complex sentences: creating agility and depth in your writing.](#)

**Punctuation alert!** If the adverbial clause starts the sentence, we need to place a comma to mark where the adverbial clause ends and the independent clause begins.

We can also move the adverbial clause to follow the independent clause, in which case **we don't need the comma**.

The chef was cooking the food **while Darci cleared the table**.  
[Independent clause + **dependent adverbial clause**]

## 2.2. Adjectival (adjective or relative) clauses

These clauses are used to describe the noun or pronoun appearing before it. In complex sentences, adjectival clauses are joined to the subject or object of another clause using **relative pronouns**.

**Relative pronouns** are words such as **who, whom, whose, which** and **that**, used to relate the adjectival clause to the noun that it is modifying.

### Punctuation alert!

When inserting a dependent adjectival clause, there should be a comma on either side of it if the information is not essential to the meaning of the sentence. If the information is essential to the meaning of the sentence, then commas are not required.

Zac gave us several gifts.  
[independent clause]

**who** is so generous  
[**relative pronoun** + **adjectival clause**]

Zac, **who** is so generous, gave us several gifts.  
[**relative pronoun** + **adjectival clause**] [complex sentence]

**You cannot start a sentence with an adjectival clause**, but they can be inserted after the subject or object of another clause.

The demonstrators, **who were becoming agitated**, began moving again.  
[Independent clause + **dependent adjectival clause**]

The girl, **who** hadn't eaten all day, devoured **the burger**.  
[Subject, **relative pronoun**, verb, **object**]

### And

The dog, **whose treat had been confiscated**, sulked in the corner.  
[Independent clause + **dependent adjectival clause**]

The dog, **who** lived down the street, sulked **in the corner**.  
[Subject, **relative pronoun**, verb, **prepositional phrase**]

### 3. Nominalisation

Nominalisation is the process of turning a verb or clause into a noun or noun group. When students control the process of nominalising speech-like writing, they are able to progress from a speech-oriented form of writing (**which is heavily action or verb based**) to a more noun based, abstract style of writing (**which is more formal, abstract or technical**). These types of sentences can be introduced in late primary school and should be regularly used by secondary school students.

Particular genres are more likely to use nominalisation (such as essays and technical writing) to support the communication of abstract ideas and concepts. Arguments often use nominalisations as they enable the **removal of agency** and **time** from statements and therefore render the **propositions more difficult to refute**. Narrative writing, on the other hand, uses abstract language that may feature imagery and metaphor, which make less use of nominalisations.

Here is an example of how to nominalise in a sentence:

The school principal is **introducing** new rules that should help students cross the road safely.

[Verb is 'introducing'.]

The **introduction** of new school road rules should help ensure the safety of students.

['Introducing' is nominalised to 'introduction' and the principal's agency is removed.]

#### A note of caution!

Overusing nominalisation can make writing more complex and sentences less engaging, as it makes it challenging to determine who or what is responsible for the action in the sentence. An awareness of how sentences have impact, and how they align with the genre within which you are writing, is an important student developmental skill.

Nominalising takes the actor and the timing out of a sentence, as in the school principal example above, where the process of introducing has become introduction, a timeless, agentless phenomenon. An easy way to nominalise verbs is by adding suffixes such as:

Verb	Nominalisation	Suffix
Translate	Translation	-ion
Frustrate	Frustration	
Argue	Argument	-ment
Govern	Government	
Refuse	Refusal	-al
Propose	Proposal	



## 4. Subordinating conjunctions

In complex sentences, independent and dependent clauses can be joined using subordinating conjunctions. As the name suggests, these types of conjunctions subordinate (make less important) one independent clause so that your attention focuses on the other clause. Subordinating conjunctions show relationships such as time, place and reason.

Subordinating conjunctions are linking words that flag how the adverbial clause is modifying the meaning of what is going on in the independent clause and indicate that the dependent clause has something to add to the main idea (independent clause). The adverbial clause is the ‘reason’ and adds more information to the independent clause.

### 4.1. Some examples of subordinating conjunctions

Time	Place	Cause	Concession
After	Where	As	Although
Before	Wherever	Because	Whereas
Once	Everywhere	Since	While

### 4.2. How to use subordinating conjunctions in a complex sentence

**When** Penny is crawling, nothing can stop her.

[**Subordinating conjunction** + dependent clause + independent clause]

The music was amazing **although** the DJ was annoying.

[Independent clause + **subordinating conjunction** + dependent clause]

## 5. Why use complex sentences?

Teaching complex sentences is an important step in developing student writing. Complex sentences are more sophisticated in their structure, and mastery is essential for students to progress to more academic and creative writing. If students don't start to use complex sentences, they will rely on simple and compound sentences, which don't offer the opportunity to create complexity and sophistication.

The other problem is, when students don't understand how to write complex sentences, they are more likely to make errors. These include run-on sentences<sup>1</sup> (two independent clauses joined without proper coordination or punctuation) or sentences that lack appropriate structure and punctuation. This is why writing needs to be taught explicitly and systematically, across all year levels and subjects, beginning with the essential foundation of sentences.

AERO's recent review of a decade of [NAPLAN data](#) revealed few students achieved scores of 5 (13%) or 6 (2%) out of 6 in sentence structure in Year 9, which indicates that students do not have consistent understanding of and control over a range of different sentence structures. This affects their ability to express meaning with precision, and process and express the complex conceptual knowledge embedded in the primary and secondary curriculum.

## 6. Suggestions for teaching complex sentences in the classroom

The following strategies are provided without context of any specific subject area, genre or text. Teachers should adapt teaching strategies accordingly.

### 6.1. Planning

Have a clear scope and sequence to map out when you are teaching sentences, to what year level and in which subject area. Sentence activities can be built into your lessons and adapted to the lesson context.

At the planning stage, teachers must consider and contextualise how complex sentences function in the type of text you are using in class (texts are used in all learning areas – for example, a case study in HPE). Regularly review your scope and sequence to ensure complex sentence writing is embedded.



## 6.2. Lesson activities

### 6.2.1. Defining and writing complex sentences

1. Present new learning
  - a. Define complex sentences.
  - b. Introduce and explain the function of adverbial and adjectival sentences, using examples.
  - c. Introduce and explain how to nominalise verbs.
2. Guided practice – activity examples
  - a. Guide students through worked examples of complex sentences.
  - b. Students identify dependent and independent clauses in complex sentences.
  - c. Given a list, students match the most appropriate dependent and independent clauses, to build complete complex sentences.
  - d. Given a list, students sort dependent and independent clauses into the correct group.
  - e. After teacher modelling, students manipulate complex sentences by reordering dependent and independent clauses.
  - f. After teaching nominalisation, ask students to choose some action verbs. Compile as a list on the board and as a class exercise turn the verbs into nouns (for example, remove/removal).
  - g. Once the verbs have been changed into nouns, ask students to write a sentence first with the verb, and then turn it into a nominalised sentence.
  - h. Students imitate complex sentence writing, based on the teacher model.
  - i. Students write complex sentences with support from the teacher.
  - j. Provide correction and feedback on all guided practice activities.
3. Independent practice
  - a. Students generate complex sentences independently on the topic they are studying in class. Monitor initial practice attempts and plan time for continual practice until skills are automatic.
  - b. Provide correction and feedback.



## 7. Activity challenge

In the 2 examples below, ask students to identify which of the sentences are simple, which are compound, and which are complex.



Evie was sixteen, but mum always reckoned she was a very young sixteen [compound]. By the time mum was sixteen she'd been working for a year, by the time she was nineteen, she was having Evie [complex]. In the album there was a photo of mum at sixteen and she looked as mature and polished as she did in her wedding photos, when she was twenty-four [complex]. Evie put the wedding photos up on the mantelpiece now [simple]. They were moving in tonight, and with all the packing cases around full of plates and saucepans and other useful stuff it was more interesting and homelier to decorate the place than to unpack properly [complex].

Wheatley, N (1987) *The House that Was Eureka*, Puffin Press, Ringwood, Victoria.

The water cycle, also known as the hydrologic cycle or the hydrological cycle, is a biogeochemical cycle that describes the continuous movement of water on, above and below the surface of the Earth [complex]. The mass of water on Earth remains fairly constant over time but the partitioning of the water into the major reservoirs of ice, fresh water, saline water (salt water) and atmospheric water is variable depending on a wide range of climatic variables [compound]. The water moves from one reservoir to another, such as from river to ocean, or from the ocean to the atmosphere, by the physical processes of evaporation, transpiration, condensation, precipitation, infiltration, surface runoff, and subsurface flow [simple]. In doing so, the water goes through different forms: liquid, solid (ice) and vapor [simple]. The ocean plays a key role in the water cycle as it is the source of 86% of global evaporation [complex].

The water cycle involves the exchange of energy, which leads to temperature changes [complex]. When water evaporates, it takes up energy from its surroundings and cools the environment [complex]. When it condenses, it releases energy and warms the environment [complex]. These heat exchanges influence climate [simple].

Wikipedia (2023) 'The water cycle', Wikipedia, accessed 8 February 2023. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Water\\_cycle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Water_cycle)

**What is the function of simple, compound and complex sentences in this piece of writing? What is the impact of using particular sentence types?**

## 8. Appendices: Connecting to the Australian Curriculum and National Literacy Learning Progression

### 8.1. Appendix A: Relevant Australian Curriculum Content Descriptions

Alignment with the Australian Curriculum Content Descriptions (English)	
<b>Foundation</b>	Not identified at this stage/year level
<b>Year 1</b>	Not identified at this stage/year level
<b>Year 2</b>	Not identified at this stage/year level
<b>Year 3</b>	Understand that a clause is a unit of grammar usually containing a subject and a verb that need to agree (AC9E3LA06)
<b>Year 4</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understand that complex sentences contain one independent clause and at least one dependent clause typically joined by a subordinating conjunction to create relationships, such as time and causality (AC9E4LA06)</li> <li>Plan, create, edit and publish written and multimodal imaginative, informative and persuasive texts, using visual features, relevant linked ideas, complex sentences, appropriate tense, synonyms and antonyms, correct spelling of multisyllabic words and simple punctuation (AC9E4LY06)</li> <li>Plan, create, rehearse and deliver structured oral and/or multimodal presentations to report on a topic, tell a story, recount events or present an argument using subjective and objective language, complex sentences, visual features, tone, pace, pitch and volume (AC9E4LY08)</li> </ul>
<b>Year 5</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understand that the structure of a complex sentence includes a main clause and at least one dependent clause, and understand how writers can use this structure for effect (AC9E5LA06)</li> <li>Plan, create, rehearse and deliver spoken and multimodal presentations that include relevant, elaborated ideas, sequencing ideas using complex sentences, specialist and technical vocabulary, pitch, tone, pace, volume, and visual and digital features (AC9E5LY07)</li> </ul>
<b>Year 6</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understand how embedded clauses can expand the variety of complex sentences to elaborate, extend and explain ideas (AC9E6LA05)</li> <li>Plan, create, edit and publish written and multimodal texts whose purposes may be imaginative, informative and persuasive, using paragraphs, a variety of complex sentences, expanded verb groups, tense, topic-specific and vivid vocabulary, punctuation, spelling and visual features (AC9E6LY06)</li> </ul>
<b>Year 7</b>	Understand how complex and compound-complex sentences can be used to elaborate, extend and explain ideas (AC9E7LA05)
<b>Year 8</b>	Examine a variety of clause structures including embedded clauses that add information and expand ideas in sentences
<b>Year 9</b>	Identify how authors vary sentence structures creatively for effects, such as intentionally using a dependent clause on its own or a sentence fragment (AC9E9LA05)
<b>Year 10</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analyse and evaluate the effectiveness of particular sentence structures to express and craft ideas (AC9E10LA05)</li> <li>Analyse how meaning and style are achieved through syntax (AC9E10LA06)</li> </ul>



## 8.2. Appendix B: Relevant Literacy Learning Progressions

Creating texts	Grammar
<b>CrT1</b> not identified at this stage/year level	<b>Gra1</b> not identified at this stage/year level
<b>CrT2</b> not identified at this stage/year level	<b>Gra2</b> not identified at this stage/year level
<b>CrT3</b> not identified at this stage/year level	<b>Gra3</b> not identified at this stage/year level
<b>CrT4</b> not identified at this stage/year level	<b>Gra4</b> not identified at this stage/year level
<b>CrT5</b> not identified at this stage/year level	<b>Gra5</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>writes complex sentences using conjunctions (when, because)</li> <li>writes generally accurate simple, compound and complex sentences with few run-on sentences and dangling clauses ('Because he was afraid.')</li> </ul>
<b>CrT6</b> not identified at this stage/year level	<b>Gra6</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>selects simple, compound and complex sentences to express and connect ideas, occasionally manipulating the structure for emphasis, clarity or effect</li> <li>uses subordinating conjunctions ('even though' in 'Even though a storm was predicted, the search and rescue mission still went ahead.')</li> </ul>
<b>CrT7</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>expands ideas through intentional use of simple, compound and occasional complex sentences</li> <li>uses cohesive vocabulary to indicate order, cause and effect (next, since)</li> </ul>	<b>Gra7</b> not identified at this stage/year level
<b>CrT8</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses cohesive devices to link points in an argument (however, on the other hand)</li> <li>consistently writes compound sentences correctly and uses a greater range of complex sentences</li> <li>uses a variety of <b>sentence</b> structures and sentence beginnings</li> </ul>	not identified at this stage/year level
<b>CrT9</b> uses a range of sentences including correctly structured complex sentences	not identified at this stage/year level

Creating texts	Grammar
<b>CrT10</b> varies <b>sentence</b> structure for effect	not identified at this stage/year level
<b>CrT11</b> uses extended <b>noun</b> groups including adjectival phrases ('a sturdy construction with modern design features')	not identified at this stage/year level

- 1 See [Compound Sentence Guide](#) for explanations and examples of run-on sentences.

To provide feedback on this guide or view further information, including full references and additional resources, visit [AERO's website](#).