

SENTENCE COMBINING SKILLS

The Need to Combine Sentences

Sentences have to be combined to avoid the monotony that would surely result if all sentences were brief and of equal length. Part of the writer's task is to employ whatever music is available to him or her in language, and part of language's music lies within the rhythms of varied sentence length and structure. Even poets who write within the formal limits and sameness of an iambic pentameter beat will sometimes strike a chord against that beat and vary the structure of their clauses and sentence length, thus keeping the text alive and the reader awake. This section will explore some of the techniques we ordinary writers use to combine sentences.

Compounding Sentences

A compound sentence consists of two or more independent clauses. That means that there are at least two units of thought within the sentence, either one of which can stand by itself as its own sentence. The clauses of a compound sentence are either separated by a semicolon (relatively rare) or connected by a coordinating conjunction (which is, more often than not, preceded by a comma). The two most common coordinating conjunctions are *and* and *but*. (The others are *or*, *for*, *yet*, and *so*.) This is the simplest technique we have for combining ideas.

Example:

- Meriwether Lewis is justly famous for his expedition into the territory of the Louisiana Purchase and beyond, but few people know of his contributions to natural science.
- Lewis had been well trained by scientists in Philadelphia prior to his expedition, and he was a curious man by nature.

Notice that the *and* does little more than link one idea to another; the *but* also links, but it does more work in terms of establishing an interesting relationship between ideas. The *and* is part of the immediate language arsenal of children and of dreams: one thing simply comes after another and the logical relationship between the ideas is not always evident or important. The word *but* (and the other coordinators) is at a slightly higher level of argument.

Compounding Sentence Elements

Within a sentence, ideas can be connected by compounding various sentence elements: subjects, verbs, objects or whole predicates, modifiers, etc. Notice that when two such elements of a sentence are compounded with a coordinating conjunction (as opposed to the two independent clauses of a compound sentence), the conjunction is usually adequate and no comma is required.

Subjects: When two or more subjects are doing parallel things, they can often be combined as a compounded subject.

Example:

- Working together, **President Jefferson and Meriwether Lewis** convinced Congress to raise money for the expedition.

Objects: When the subject(s) is/are acting upon two or more things in parallel, the objects can be combined.

Example:

- President Jefferson believed that the headwaters of the Missouri reached all the way to the Canadian border.
- He also believed that meant he could claim all that land for the United States.
- ➔ President Jefferson believed **that** the headwaters of the Missouri might reach all the way to the Canadian border **and that** he could claim all that land for the United States.

Notice that the objects must be parallel in construction: Jefferson believed that this was true and that was true. If the objects are not parallel (Jefferson was convinced of two things: **that the Missouri reached** all the way to the Canadian border **and wanted to begin** the expedition during his term in office.) the sentence can go awry.

Verbs: When the subject(s) is/are doing two things at once, ideas can sometimes be combined by compounding verbs and verb forms.

Example:

- He studied the biological and natural sciences.
- He learned how to categorize and draw animals accurately.
- ➔ He **studied** the biological and natural sciences **and learned** how to categorize and draw animals accurately.

Notice that there is no comma preceding the "and learned" connecting the compounded elements above.

Example:

- In Philadelphia, Lewis learned to chart the movement of the stars.
- He also learned to analyze their movements with mathematical precision.
- ➔ In Philadelphia, Lewis learned **to chart and analyze** the movement of the stars with mathematical precision.
- ➔ *OR* — In Philadelphia, Lewis learned **to chart** the stars **and analyze** their movements with mathematical precision.

(Notice in this second version that we don't have to repeat the "to" of the infinitive to maintain parallel form.)

Modifiers: Whenever it is appropriate, modifiers such as prepositional phrases can be compounded.

Example:

- Lewis and Clark recruited some of their adventurers from river-town bars.
- They also used recruits from various military outposts.
- ➔ Lewis and Clark recruited their adventurers from river-town bars and various military outposts.

Notice that we do not need to repeat the preposition *from* to make the ideas successfully parallel in form.

Subordinating One Clause to Another

The act of *coordinating* clauses simply links ideas; *subordinating* one clause to another establishes a more complex relationship between ideas, showing that one idea depends on another in some way: a chronological development, a cause-and-effect relationship, a conditional relationship, etc.

Example:

- William Clark was not officially granted the rank of captain prior to the expedition's departure.
- Captain Lewis more or less ignored this technicality and treated Clark as his equal in authority and rank.
- ➔ **Although** William Clark was not officially granted the rank of captain prior to the expedition's departure, **Captain** Lewis more or less ignored this technicality and treated Clark as his equal in authority and rank.
- The explorers approached the headwaters of the Missouri.
- They discovered, to their horror, that the Rocky Mountain range stood between them and their goal, a passage to the Pacific.
- ➔ **As** the explorers approached the headwaters of the Missouri, **they** discovered, to their horror, that the Rocky Mountain range stood between them and their goal, a passage to the Pacific.

When we use subordination of clauses to combine ideas, the rules of punctuation are very important. It might be a good idea to review [the definition of clauses](#) at this point and the uses of the [comma](#) in setting off introductory and parenthetical elements.

Using Appositives to Connect Ideas

The appositive is probably the most efficient technique we have for combining ideas.

An [appositive or appositive phrase](#) is a renaming, a re-identification, of something earlier in the text. You can think of an appositive as a modifying clause from which the clausal machinery (usually a relative pronoun and a linking verb) has been removed. An appositive is often, but not always, a parenthetical element which requires a pair of commas to set it off from the rest of the sentence.

Example:

- Sacagawea, **who was** one of the Indian wives of Charbonneau, **who was** a French fur-trader, accompanied the expedition as a translator.

- A pregnant, fifteen-year-old Indian woman, [Sacagawea](#), one of the wives of the French fur-trader [Charbonneau](#), accompanied the expedition as a translator.

Notice that in the second sentence above, Sacagawea's name is a parenthetical element (structurally, the sentence adequately identifies her as "a pregnant, fifteen-year-old Indian woman"), and thus her name is set off by commas; Charbonneau's name, however, is essential to the meaning of the sentence (otherwise, which fur-trader are we talking about?) and is not set off by a pair of commas.

Using Participial Phrases to Connect Ideas

A writer can integrate the idea of one sentence into a larger structure by turning that idea into a modifying phrase.

Example:

- Captain Lewis allowed his men to make important decisions in a democratic manner.
- This democratic attitude fostered a spirit of togetherness and commitment on the part of Lewis's fellow explorers.
- ➔ [Allowing his men to make important decisions in a democratic manner](#), Lewis fostered a spirit of togetherness and commitment among his fellow explorers.

In the sentence above, the [participial phrase](#) modifies the subject of the sentence, *Lewis*. Phrases like this are usually set off from the rest of the sentence with a comma.

Example:

- The expeditionary force was completely out of touch with their families for over two years.
- They put their faith entirely in Lewis and Clark's leadership.
- They never once rebelled against their authority.
- ➔ [Completely out of touch with their families for over two years](#), the men of the expedition put their faith in Lewis and Clark's leadership [and](#) never once rebelled against their authority.

Using Absolute Phrases to Connect Ideas

Perhaps the most elegant — and most misunderstood — method of combining ideas is the [absolute phrase](#). This phrase, which is often found at the beginning of sentence, is made up of a noun (the phrase's "subject") followed, more often than not, by a participle. Other modifiers might also be part of the phrase. There is no true verb in an absolute phrase, however, and it is always treated as a parenthetical element, an introductory modifier, which is set off by a comma.

The absolute phrase might be confused with a participial phrase, and the difference between them is structurally slight but significant. The participial phrase does not contain the subject-participle relationship of the absolute phrase; it modifies the subject of the independent clause that follows. The absolute phrase, on the other hand, is said to modify the entire clause that follows. In the first combined sentence below, for instance, the absolute phrase modifies the subject, *Lewis*, but it also modifies the verb, telling us "under what conditions" or "in what way"

or "how" he *disappointed* the world. The absolute phrase thus modifies the entire subsequent clause and should not be confused with a **dangling participle**, which must modify the subject which immediately follows.

Example:

- Lewis's fame and fortune was virtually guaranteed by his exploits.
- Lewis disappointed the entire world by inexplicably failing to publish his journals.
- **His fame and fortune virtually guaranteed by his exploits,** Lewis disappointed the entire world by inexplicably failing to publish his journals.
- Lewis's long journey was finally completed.
- His men in the Corps of Discovery were dispersed.
- Lewis died a few years later on his way back to Washington, D.C., completely alone.
- **His long journey completed and his men in the Corps of Discovery dispersed,** Lewis died a few years later on his way back to Washington, D.C., completely alone.

EXERCISES

Directions: In the text-area below each group of sentences, combine all of those sentences into one effective sentence containing only one independent clause. These sentences can be combined in many interesting ways, depending on what idea is put into the independent clause and what ideas are subordinated (and how).

1. Hartford is the capital of Connecticut.
It is the second largest city in the state.
2. Hartford was once known as an industrial center.
It was the home of several manufacturers.
They made firearms, typewriters, bicycles, and even cars.
3. Today, though, several insurance companies make Hartford their home.
Aetna, the Travelers, the Hartford, and Cigna are in Hartford.
Their home offices are within miles of one another.
4. Manufacturers once took advantage of Hartford's access to the Connecticut River.
They also enjoyed Hartford's well-educated workforce.
5. Eventually, cheap labor in the southern states lured manufacturing away from Hartford.
Large empty factories were all that was left of Hartford's industrial past.
6. Some of these factories have been torn down.
Some of them have been converted to artists' studios.

7. Today, great wealth abounds in Hartford.
The wealth is centered in the insurance industry.
However, few manufacturing jobs are still available.
8. Mark Twain is the author of *Huckleberry Finn*.
Huckleberry Finn is a classic American novel.
Mark Twain's real name was Samuel L. Clemens.
He lived in Hartford for several years.
9. Mark Twain's house was very elaborate and elegant.
It was on Farmington Avenue.
It was in an area called Nook Farm.
He was a neighbor of Harriet Beecher Stowe.
Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.
10. Mark Twain was one of the first three people in Hartford to own a telephone.
The telephone was first used commercially in nearby New Haven.
There was practically no one to talk to.
Mark Twain never really liked this newfangled gadget.