

Sentence-Composing Tools: Noun Clause

DEFINITION

A dependent clause that works like a noun. (For more about dependent clauses, see pages 68–73.) Like all clauses, noun clauses contain a subject and its verb. To understand how noun clauses act like nouns, insert *what we eat for breakfast* into any of these blanks:

1. ____ is important. (*subject*)
2. We discussed _____. (*direct object*)
3. The health teacher talked about _____. (*object of preposition*)
4. A valuable part of a healthy diet is _____. (*predicate noun*)
5. A regular morning meal, _____, provides energy for school. (*appositive*)

Most noun clauses begin with *that*, *what*, or *how*. However, some noun clauses begin with other words. The best way to identify a noun clause is this: if a clause is removable, it's not a noun clause; if a clause is *not* removable, it is a noun clause.

Removable (Adverb or Adjective Clauses):

1. The exact year **when George Washington was born** was 1732. (*adjective clause*)
2. **When George Washington was born**, cars didn't exist. (*adverb clause*)

Nonremovable (Noun Clauses):

3. **When George Washington was born** was a question on the quiz.
4. The discussion was about **when George Washington was born**.
5. Mr. Jameson discussed **when George Washington was born**.

Sentences can contain single or multiple noun clauses:

Single Noun Clause:

1. The most insidious thing about Ronnie was **that weak minds found him worth imitating**.

Stephen King, *Hearts in Atlantis*

2. Her mind only vaguely grasped **what he was saying**.

Kate Chopin, "A Respectable Woman"

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3. I don't know **how he found his way back to the car**.

Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood*

Multiple Noun Clauses:

4. The writer must learn to read critically but constructively, to cut **what is bad**, to reveal **what is good**.

Donald M. Murray, "The Maker's Eye: Revising Your Own Manuscripts"

5. Most of **what I write**, like most of **what I say in casual conversation**, will not amount to much.

William Stafford, "A Way of Writing"

6. I asked him once **why he had to go away, why the land was so important**.

Mildred D. Taylor, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*

PRACTICE 1: MATCHING

Match the noun clauses with the sentences. Write out each sentence, inserting and underlining the noun clauses.

Sentences:

1. Survivors still wonder ^.

John Hersey, *Hiroshima*

2. He looked over to ^, their naked heads sunk in the hunched feathers.

Ernest Hemingway, "The Snows of Kilimanjaro"

3. It was April and sunny outside, and I wondered ^.

Frank McCourt, *Teacher Man*

4. ^ trickled thinly down his wrist.

J. D. Salinger, "The Laughing Man"

5. Robert's mother declared ^.

Tracy Kidder, *Among Schoolchildren*

Noun Clauses:

- a. what little blood he had left

- b. that Robert had his father's crazy genes

- c. why they lived when so many others died

- d. where the huge, filthy buzzards sat

- e. how many Aprils I had left, how many sunny days

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PRACTICE 2: UNSCRAMBLING TO IMITATE

In the model and the scrambled list, identify the noun clause. Next, unscramble and write out the sentence parts to imitate the model. Finally, write your own imitation of the model and identify the noun clause.

MODEL: He realized that the swollen flesh on the side of his mouth was a leech, growing fat as it sucked his lips.

Michael Crichton, *Jurassic Park*

- a. that the thin boy in the back of the room
- b. taking notes as he concealed his intent
- c. no one noticed
- d. was an infiltrator

PRACTICE 3: COMBINING TO IMITATE

In the model, identify the noun clause. Next, combine the list of sentences to imitate the model. Finally, write your own imitation of the model and identify the noun clause.

MODEL: Not daring to glance at the books, I went out of the library, fearing that the librarian would call me back for further questioning.

Richard Wright, *Black Boy*

- a. He was not wanting to appear as a coward.
- b. He dived down from the cliff.
- c. He was hoping that his buddies would accept him soon.
- d. He was hoping for acceptance into their fraternity.

PRACTICE 4: IMITATING

Identify the noun clauses in the models and sample imitations. Then write an imitation of each model sentence, one sentence part at a time. Read one of your imitations to see if your classmates can guess which model you imitated.

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Models:

1. Others remembered that Phil Latham, the wrestling coach, lived just across the Common and that he was an expert in first aid.

John Knowles, *A Separate Peace*

Sample: No one knew that Sally Henderson, the winning student, sang Saturday nights at the nursing home and that she was a soprano of great talent.

2. When I pointed out that writing was such a slow process that it made me impatient with my poor handwriting, he suggested that I learn to type.

Daniel Keyes, *Flowers for Algernon*

Sample: When I asked why tennis was such a frustrating sport that it made me discontent with my low control, she suggested that I take up Ping-Pong.

3. Because of the routines we follow, we often forget that life is an ongoing adventure.

Maya Angelou, *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*

Sample: Because of the people we know, we always realize that friendship is the greatest treasure.

PRACTICE 5: EXPANDING

The noun clauses are omitted at the caret mark (^) in the following sentences. For each caret, add a noun clause, blending your content and style with the rest of the sentence.

1. What matters is what ^, not how ^.

Isabel Allende, *Daughter of Fortune*

2. They felt that ^, that ^.

John Steinbeck, *The Red Pony*

3. I could never tell the students in my classes how ^, how ^, how ^, how ^.

Frank McCourt, *Teacher Man*