

## Unit 8

# FINITE SUBORDINATE CLAUSES

## I. INTRODUCTION

There are two important things that you need to know about how to put sentences together grammatically in English:

- (i) How to put a **clause** together (this was the point of Unit 7).
- (ii) How to join two or more clauses together to form longer and more complex sentences.

A **main clause** (or **independent clause**) is one which is capable of standing alone as a **sentence**, and if you can do (i) properly, then you can write simple sentences properly. (But be warned that 'simple sentences' may not be all that simple!) In Units 8 and 9, we'll focus on how to do (ii).

At the end of Unit 7, we mentioned that we can join two (or more) main clauses together with a coordinating conjunction (*and, or, but*) to form a larger sentence, as in:

1. I opened the door and (I) let him in. [NB. The subject 'I' of the second clause is omitted because it is identical to the subject of the first clause.]
2. I warned him about drunk driving but he would not listen to me.

Such sentences are called **compound sentences**. Notice that each of the main clauses in a compound sentence is capable of standing on its own as a simple (but complete) sentence:

- 2a. I warned him about drunk driving.
- 2b. He would not listen to me.

If all English sentences were simple sentences (consisting of one clause only), or compound sentences (formed by joining two (or more) main clauses together with a conjunction), it would be so much easier to learn how to construct sentences in English! But are the majority of English sentences in fact that simple?

### QUESTION 1:

Analyse the sentences in the following text. Underline those sentences which are neither 'simple sentences' nor 'compound sentences'.

The atrocity is above and beyond politics and partisanship. It would not have made any difference if the crime had been committed in reverse – if American terrorists had hijacked Afghan or Iraqi civilian planes and deliberately crashed them into the commercial centre of Kabul or Bagdad with the sole purpose of killing as many innocent civilians as possible. No matter what the cause may be, no matter which side of the conflict is right or wrong, nothing on earth could possibly justify or explain so heinous a crime against humanity. No civilised human being, of whatever persuasion (pro-American, anti-American, Christian, Muslim) would hesitate to condemn it in the strongest possible terms, and to demand that something be done against the perpetrators (whoever they may be). Those who could see something to cheer about at the sight of thousands of innocent people being blown to pieces or burning or leaping to their deaths had better look into their hearts, and ask themselves whether they are really human.

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You will find that most of the sentences in the above text (and in most other texts) consist of more than one clause, and that most of these clauses are not main clauses but ‘**subordinate clauses**’.

## II. SUBORDINATE CLAUSES

What is a ‘subordinate clause’?

Let’s think of a tree: it has a trunk, and several branches. If you cut away all the branches, you are still left with a tree, and it can still grow. But if you cut away the trunk, all the branches will fall and die, because they all depend on the tree trunk.

Now look at a simple sentence, which consists of one single clause:

1. He was very naughty.

You can compare it to a ‘trunk’. To this ‘trunk’ or ‘main clause’, you can attach other clauses, like ‘branches’:

2. When he was a little boy, he was very naughty.
3. He was very naughty because his parents never taught him how to behave.
4. He was very naughty even though his teacher threatened to punish him.

The underlined clauses above are like ‘branches’ which cannot stand on their own away from the ‘trunk’ or main clause:

5. \* When he was a little boy.
6. \* Because his parents never taught him how to behave.
7. \* Even though his teacher threatened to punish him.

For this reason, we call these clauses ‘**subordinate**’ (or ‘**dependent**’) clauses. There is another reason: they tell you something more about the main clause, such as the time, place, reason, manner, circumstances, and so on. So, both in terms of grammar and meaning, subordinate clauses can be said to depend on the main clause.

In Unit 3, we have seen that the verb of a **main clause** must be **finite** (or **tensed**). A clause with a finite verb is a ‘**finite clause**’. For example, (1-2) are finite, but not (3-4) (which are ungrammatical):

1. John bought an apartment with his savings.
2. Mary teaches French in our school.
3. \* John buying an apartment with his savings.
4. \* Mary to teach French in our school.

So, main clauses must be finite. Do **subordinate clauses** have to be finite too?

### **QUESTION 2:**

Underline the subordinate clauses in the following sentences, and in each case say whether the subordinate clause is finite (F) or non-finite (NF) by circling the correct answer.

1. Because he was a tourist, he was easily cheated. (F/NF)
2. Being a tourist, he was easily cheated. (F/NF)
3. He booked his ticket early in order to be sure of a seat. (F/NF)
4. He booked his ticket early so that he could be sure of a seat. (F/NF)
5. Before he went to bed, he usually had a drink. (F/NF)
6. Before going to bed, he usually had a drink. (F/NF)
7. He told me that I should study harder. (F/NF)
8. He told me to study harder. (F/NF)

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Thus, you’ve found that subordinate clauses may be either finite or non-finite. In the present unit, we will focus on **finite** subordinate clauses only, and leave non-finite subordinate clauses to Unit 9.

### III. THE FORM OF FINITE SUBORDINATE CLAUSES

A finite subordinate clause has all the ‘parts’ of the clause that we explored in Unit 7. Just as in the case of a main clause, we can find subordinate clauses with the patterns SV, SVO, SVOO, SVC and SVOC, with Adverbials added if desired.

#### QUESTION 3:

Analyse the underlined subordinate clauses in the sentences below. Try to identify the various parts of the clause as **S**(ubject), **V**(erb), **O**(bject), **C**(omplement), and **A**(dverbial), by bracketing each part and writing the appropriate letter above it. In addition, in all these subordinate clauses, there is one word which does not belong to any of the 5 parts (S,V,O,C,A). Circle that word.

1. Before the star arrived, everybody was waiting impatiently.
2. When the star finally arrived in a limousine, everybody rushed forward to see her.
3. The singer had to cancel the concert because he had lost his voice.
4. Since you are my student, you’ll have to obey me.
5. After she had given him all her money, she never heard from him again.
6. The committee told him that they had elected him president.

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#### **The Subordinator**

Analysing the subordinate clauses in Question 3 will have helped you discover two things:

- (i) finite subordinate clauses have the same basic patterns as main clauses; and
- (ii) there is one extra word which is not found in a main clause. That word is highlighted for you below:

1. **Before** the star arrived, everybody was waiting impatiently.
2. **When** the star finally arrived in a limousine, everybody rushed forward to see her.
3. The singer had to cancel the concert **because** he had lost his voice.
4. **Since** you are my student, you’ll have to obey me.
5. **After** she had given him all her money, she never heard from him again.
6. The committee told him **that** they had elected him president.

This is an important little word, and it is known as a **subordinator**. As the name suggests, it introduces a subordinate clause. Without it, a finite subordinate clause would look just like a main clause, e.g. ‘the star arrived’ instead of ‘before the star arrived’, ‘they had elected him president’ instead of ‘that they had elected him president’, and so on. That is why the subordinator is so important.

Many students, however, make the mistake of leaving out the subordinator when it's needed. This happens particularly with subordinators like *that* and *whether*.

**QUESTION 4:**

In the following sentences (written by students), is there a subordinator missing? If so, fill it in. Correct any other mistakes that you may find.

1. A large majority thought oral skills were important.
2. There are different opinions about leadership ability is important or not.
3. The majority disagreed an attractive appearance is important.
4. The respondents considered appearance is not an important quality.
5. Scientists find the super carrot can inhibit cancer.
6. Do you know that how coal was formed?

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This kind of mistake happens most often with the subordinator *that*. One possible explanation is that this subordinator – unlike *because, though, when, etc.* – does not convey any meaning of its own; also, there are no subordinators similar to *that* in Chinese (which has subordinators similar to *because, though, etc.*) And since ‘that’ can be omitted under some circumstances, especially after the verbs ‘say’ and ‘think’ (‘I think you are right’), some students think they can omit it any time. If in doubt, it is safer not to leave it out.

**QUESTION 5:**

There is a blank space in each of the sentences below. Fill it with a subordinator if you think one is needed.

1. He thinks \_\_\_\_\_ he is the cleverest student in class.
2. She said \_\_\_\_\_ she would come to my party.
3. Magellan proved \_\_\_\_\_ the earth is round by sailing round the globe.
4. Anne Frank wrote \_\_\_\_\_ she still believed human nature to be good.
5. He wanted to know \_\_\_\_\_ the flight had arrived or not.
6. She wondered \_\_\_\_\_ she would win the competition.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ the earth is round was known to only a few in ancient times.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ he is guilty or not has never been proved beyond doubt.

9. \_\_\_\_\_ I have not said a word does not mean that I have no opinions.

The above exercise will have helped you see the importance of the subordinator in introducing a finite subordinate clause in English – something that you don't find to the same extent in Chinese.

## IV. THE FUNCTION OF SUBORDINATE CLAUSES

To understand the **form** of finite subordinate clauses is one thing. To understand their **function** is another, and in order to use subordinate clauses properly, you'll have to understand both.

To put it simply:

A **subordinate clause** functions as a part of another clause.

The parts of a clause (you may recall) are **S**(ubject), **V**(erb), **O**(bject), **C**(omplement), and **A**(dverbial). A subordinate clause may function as any of these parts (except Verb). Let's see how that works.

### QUESTION 6:

The underlined subordinate clauses in the following sentences function as part of the main clause. What 'part' do they play in the main clause (S, O, C or A)?

1. What I do in my spare time is my own business.
2. How the millennium bug would affect our lives was not known until January 1.
3. That a major earthquake will hit Los Angeles in the near future is almost a certainty.
4. Whether Mainland China and Taiwan can resolve their differences remains to be seen.

ANSWER:

In the above sentences, the underlined subordinate clause functions as the \_\_\_\_\_ of the main clause.

In each of the following items, combine the two sentences into one by changing one of them into a subordinate clause. (You will probably find that this subordinate clause has the same function as the underlined clauses given above).

5. Hong Kong will be the site of a new Disneyland theme park. This has caused a lot of excitement.

ANSWER:

6. The continent of Atlantis may or may not have existed in ancient times. This has been debated for centuries.

ANSWER:

7. He gave up everything to become a monk. The reason puzzles me.

ANSWER:

8. He said something just before he died. It is known only to his wife.

ANSWER:

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### QUESTION 7:

What part do the underlined subordinate clauses play within the main clauses of the following sentences?

1. He knew that he was going to pass the exam with flying colours.
2. He found that nobody believed his story.
3. She finally discovered what her son was doing behind her back.
4. Do you remember how the trick was done?
5. Tom gave Peter what he wanted.

ANSWER:

In the above sentences, the underlined subordinate clause functions as the \_\_\_\_\_ of the main clause.

In each of the following items, combine the two sentences into one by changing one of them into a subordinate clause. (You will probably find that this subordinate clause has the same function as the underlined clauses given above).

6. He found this out. His wife was having an affair with his boss.

ANSWER:

7. Matter is a form of energy. Einstein discovered this.

ANSWER:

8. He wrote something. I cannot read it.

ANSWER:

9. Did he pass the exam? He wants to know.

ANSWER:

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### QUESTION 8:

What part do the underlined subordinate clauses play in the main clauses of the following sentences?

1. The news was that the bombing was not an accident.
2. The truth is that nobody is perfect.
3. The question is whether the stock market is heading up or down.
4. The mystery was how he could have escaped under guard.
5. Years of ill treatment has made him what he is today.

ANSWER:

In the above sentences, the underlined subordinate clause functions as the \_\_\_\_\_ of the main clause.

In each of the following items, combine the two sentences into one by changing one of them into a subordinate clause. (You will probably find that this subordinate clause has the same function as the underlined clauses given above).

6. No-one can succeed without self-reliance. This is the truth.



ANSWER:

7. Should we sacrifice principle to expediency? This is the real issue.

ANSWER:

8. This is the reason for his absence. He had to attend an emergency meeting in Beijing.

ANSWER:

9. Mainland China and Taiwan may come to a peaceful settlement. This is our hope.

ANSWER:

### QUESTION 9:

What part do the underlined subordinate clauses play in the main clauses of the following sentences?

1. I will contact you when I visit Beijing next time.
2. He lost his job because he was too irresponsible.
3. He suffered a heart attack while he was playing tennis.
4. Although he was poor, he gave money to charity.
5. Mozart could compose concertos before he was ten.
6. She disguised herself so that her fans would not recognise her.

ANSWER:

In the above sentences, the underlined subordinate clause functions as the \_\_\_\_\_ of the main clause.

In each of the following items, combine the two sentences into one by changing one of them into a subordinate clause. (You will probably find that this subordinate clause has the same function as the underlined clauses given above).

7. My flight was cancelled. The airport was flooded.

ANSWER:

8. He saved every dollar he could. He wanted to put his son through college.

ANSWER:

9. The building collapsed. He could not get out in time.

ANSWER:

10. He lost everything in the earthquake. Still he is happy to be alive.

ANSWER:

11. I saw a terrible accident. I was driving to work at that time.

ANSWER:

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You will find that the last function, i.e. as **Adverbials**, is the most common function of subordinate clauses. Subordinate clauses often tell us something about the time, the place, the reason, the cause, the result, and other circumstances surrounding an event.

To sum up, here are the most important points that you should have learned from this unit:

Subordinate clauses may be either finite or non-finite;

**Finite** subordinate clauses have the same form as main clauses, except that they are preceded by a **subordinator**;

Finite subordinate clauses function as part of another clause – as its Subject, Object, Complement or Adverbial.

## ADDITIONAL EXERCISES

### **Text 1:**

Fill in the blanks in the following text with a suitable **subordinator** (such as *when, where, because, while, after, as, if, that*, etc.), if you think that one is needed.

Three women died and 21 other people - 17 of them fire officers and ambulancemen - were injured yesterday \_\_\_\_\_ a fireball tore through a flat \_\_\_\_\_ a woman was apparently trying to commit suicide.

The explosion, which rocked the 22-storey building in Tsui Chuk Garden, took place \_\_\_\_\_ firemen broke down the door of the flat in a rescue operation.

In the evening, the charred body of another woman was found inside the kitchen of the flat \_\_\_\_\_ the blast occurred in block E.

Four firemen were seriously injured with burns to their faces \_\_\_\_\_ another seven were in stable condition.

Five other officers were treated and discharged \_\_\_\_\_ another was under observation in hospital. Four other residents in the block of flats were injured.

Several of the rescue workers who were injured were in a lift on the way to the scene \_\_\_\_\_ the explosion sent it plunging from the fifth floor to the second.

### **Texts 2 & 3:**

In the following two texts, words have been left out at regular intervals. Fill in each of the blanks with a suitable word which fits both grammatically and in terms of meaning:

#### **Text 2:**

China seems to be in the throes \_\_\_\_\_ a burgeoning English craze. More than 50,000 \_\_\_\_\_ attended this month's Beijing Foreign Languages Festival, \_\_\_\_\_ English was the star attraction.

English programmes \_\_\_\_\_ being strengthened at all levels of schooling, \_\_\_\_\_ more university courses are being taught in \_\_\_\_\_. With an eye on the Olympics, thousands \_\_\_\_\_ police

officers, taxi drivers and public servants \_\_\_\_\_ being given English lessons.

Of course, it \_\_\_\_\_ not for the love of Uncle Sam \_\_\_\_\_ English syntax. Learning English is seen as \_\_\_\_\_ way for individuals to earn more money, \_\_\_\_\_ for the country to accelerate its rise \_\_\_\_\_ a world power.

"Li expressly espouses learning \_\_\_\_\_ in order to catch up with and \_\_\_\_\_ the West, a vision he shares with \_\_\_\_\_ government and many Chinese intellectuals," said Barry Sautman, \_\_\_\_\_ expert on Chinese nationalism at \_\_\_\_\_ Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

Mr Li \_\_\_\_\_ that Americans expect Chinese people to learn \_\_\_\_\_ language, while they make little effort themselves \_\_\_\_\_ learn Putonghua - even while living in China. \_\_\_\_\_ Chinese person's first response when meeting a \_\_\_\_\_ in China is usually to apologise for \_\_\_\_\_ English deficiencies they might have. Crazy English \_\_\_\_\_ targets this sense of insecurity with its \_\_\_\_\_ on overcoming shyness.

### **Text 3:**

After all, the proposals affect everyone and only fools \_\_\_\_\_ say that these proposals do not affect them. It \_\_\_\_\_, of course, true that 99 per cent of \_\_\_\_\_ Hong Kong population will never be traitors, or subvert \_\_\_\_\_ central government, or steal state secrets.

But do they \_\_\_\_\_ that the new proposals will have the effect of \_\_\_\_\_ the freedom of the press, the freedom of association, \_\_\_\_\_ assembly, of procession and of demonstration - all of which \_\_\_\_\_ vital to any modern and vibrant society such \_\_\_\_\_ Hong Kong? Do they know that if the freedom \_\_\_\_\_ the press goes, then no other freedom is safe? \_\_\_\_\_ they know that a community which does not enjoy \_\_\_\_\_ freedoms will produce people without creative or independent minds? Do \_\_\_\_\_ know that this lack of creativity and independent thinking \_\_\_\_\_ causing concern for the governments in Singapore and China?

\_\_\_\_\_, if you want your children and their children to \_\_\_\_\_  
up without creativity, please support the proposals.