

What is a clause?

From Year 1 onwards children are taught to write sentences made up of two clauses as part of sentence-level literacy work in the classroom. We explain everything you need to know about main and subordinate clauses in parent-friendly language.



What is a clause?

Clauses are the building blocks of English sentences, **groups of words that contain a subject and a verb.**

To understand clauses, it is a good idea to review the different components that make up a sentence.

Words are the **smallest units of meaning**, for example:

squirrel

Phrases are **small groups of words intended to convey meaning**, such as:

the fast, red squirrel

A **clause** is a **group of words that contain a subject** (the **noun** or **pronoun** about which something is being said, usually the doer of the action) **and a verb** (a doing word).

An example of a clause is:

The fast, red squirrel darted up a tree.

The subject of this clause is the fast, red squirrel and the verb is 'darted'. This can also be called a simple sentence.

What is a main (or major) clause?

A main clause is a clause that contains **a subject and an object**. Main clauses make sense on their own.

I like bananas.

↑
main clause

'I like bananas.' is a **simple sentence** which is made up of a main clause.

I like bananas and I like grapes.

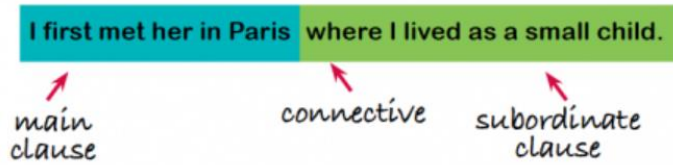
↑ ↑ ↑
main clause connective main clause

This is a **compound sentence**: it is made up of two main clauses: 'I like bananas' and 'I like grapes'. The two main clauses are joined by the **connective** 'and'.

Sometimes a sentence is made up of two clauses: a main clause and a **subordinate (or dependent) clause**, which relies on the main clause.

What is a subordinate clause?

A **subordinate clause** contains a subject and a verb, but it needs to be attached to a main clause because it **cannot make sense on its own**. For example:



This is a **complex sentence** (also referred to as a **multi-clause sentence**). It has a main clause ('I first saw her in Paris') and a subordinate clause (' where I lived as a small child'), which relies on the main clause to make sense. The two clauses are joined by the **connective** 'where'.

Connectives that join clauses can be **conjunctions**, **prepositions** and **adverbs**.

Examples of subordinate clauses include **embedded clauses** and **relative clauses**.

Main clauses don't always have to come before subordinate clauses in sentences. For example:

