



Subordination Techniques Foundation Lesson

Skill Focus

Levels of Thinking				
Remember	Understand	Apply	Analyze	Evaluate
Close Reading	Grammar		Composition	
	Parts of Speech Phrases Absolute (10) Appositive (7) Participial (8) Clauses Subordinate/Dependent		Style/Voice Conscious Manipulation of Sentence Patterns (9) Coordination/Subordination (9) Experimentation with Sentence Variety Use of Various Sentence Openings (9)	

Grammar

Materials and Resources

- *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls
- *The Giver* by Lois Lowry
- *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher* by Lewis Thomas

Lesson Introduction

Once students grasp the concept of subordination, they reap the rewards in two ways. First, they will become much more alert to these patterns of language within texts and will be able to connect the *way* something is written to meaning in the text. Second, studying other authors' grammatical patterns will naturally lead them to emulate these devices in their own writing. After students internalize the patterns in fine writing, they will gradually add these devices to their own compositions.

The concept of subordination is a little like learning to find the square root the old-fashioned way. At first, the concept looks especially tricky and difficult and even impossible, but eventually, with repeated exposure to the concept, the light comes on in the mind, something clicks, and the student has assimilated a new pattern of language. Sixth graders can grasp the concept of subordination once it is systematically introduced using grade-level material, and every year after that, students' prose and poetry will become richer, more elegant, and more sophisticated through the use of increasingly more complex language techniques. Great writers are not born – they learn to write, led by a teacher willing to show the way patiently.

First, students must understand coordination and its limitations. Remember FANBOYS (the coordinating conjunctions), and coordination comes naturally.

F – for A – and N – nor B – but O – or Y – yet S – so

Coordination involves combining equal parts – equal adjectives, equal nouns, equal independent clauses, etc. But coordination actually gives equal weight to each idea, and many times the writer wants to emphasize one idea over another. And coordination tends to become monotonous when used too often. Consider the first sentences from the sixth grade annotated prose passage from *Where the Red Fern Grows*.

- (1) My fire had burned down, leaving only a glowing red body of coals. The cave was dark and silent. Chill from the night had crept in. I was on the point of getting up to rebuild my fire, when I heard what had awakened me. At first I thought it was a woman screaming. I listened. My heart began to pound. I could feel the strain all over my body as nerves grew tighter and tighter.
- (5) It came again, closer this time. The high pitch of the scream shattered the silence of the quiet night. The sound seemed to be all around us. It screamed its way into the cave and rang like a blacksmith's anvil against the rock walls. The blood froze in my veins. I was terrified. Although I had never heard one, I knew
- (10) what it was. It was the scream of a mountain lion.
- The big cat screamed again. Leaves boiled and stirred where my pups were. In the reflection of the glowing coals, I could see that one was sitting up. It was the boy dog. A leaf had become entangled in the fuzzy hair of a floppy ear. The ear flicked. The leaf dropped.
- (15) Again the hellish scream rang out over the mountains. Leaves flew as my pup left the bed. I jumped up and tried to call him back.
- Reaching the mouth of the cave, he stopped. Raising his small red head high in the air, he bawled his challenge to the devil cat. The bawl must have scared him as much as it had startled me. He came tearing back. The tiny hairs on his back were
- (20) standing on end.

Rawls, Wilson. *Where the Red Fern Grows*. New York: Bantam Books, 1974, p. 45.

If some of the sentences above were rewritten using only coordination, this technique would render the following result:

My fire had burned down, and it left only a glowing red body of coals...I was on the point of getting up to rebuild my fire, but I heard what had awakened me...I could feel the strain all over my body, and my nerves grew tighter and tighter.

Wilson Rawls did not mean for every idea to receive equal weight. Here are *his* sentences:

My fire had burned down, leaving only a glowing body of coals. (participial phrase)
 I was on the point of getting up to rebuild my fire, when I heard what had awakened me. (two dependent clauses)
 I could feel the strain all over my body as nerves grew tighter and tighter. (dependent clause)



The dependent clauses and participial phrase add variety and allow the main clause to be the focal point of the sentence.

Subordination allows some ideas to be dominant and some to be secondary. Subordination provides depth and variety and different patterns. Subordination gives sentences a pleasing rhythm. (The preceding three sentences in this very paragraph are not joined together with subordination, hence their choppy quality.)

Students can use these grammatical elements for subordination:

- dependent clauses
- appositives
- participles and participial phrases
- absolute phrases



Subordination Techniques

Foundation Lesson

With the help of your teacher, spend some time learning to identify the subordinating conjunctions and relative pronouns since these words are flags signaling the approach of a dependent clause.

The relative pronouns are

who whom whose which that

The following words are common subordinating conjunctions. Many others exist, as well.

after since although unless as
until because when before where

Read the following passage from Wilson Rawls' novel *Where the Red Fern Grows*.

- (1) My fire had burned down, leaving only a glowing red body of coals. The cave was dark and silent. Chill from the night had crept in. I was on the point of getting up to rebuild my fire, when I heard what had awakened me. At first I thought it was a woman screaming. I listened. My heart began to pound. I could feel the strain all over my body as nerves grew tighter and tighter.
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Dependent Clauses

Consider the following sentence construction from the passage:

“Although I had never heard one, I knew what it was.” (subordination)

If the author had chosen to use coordination, the sentence would read as follows:

I had never heard one, but I knew what it was.” (coordination)

1. Identify coordination and subordination in the following sentences. If the technique used is subordination, change to coordination (adding a coordinating conjunction), and if coordination, change to subordination (adding a subordinating conjunction or relative pronoun).
 - a. “In the reflection of the glowing coals, I could see that one was sitting up.”
 - b. “Leaves flew as my pup left the bed.”
 - c. “I jumped up and tried to call him back.”
 - d. “The bawl must have scared him as much as it had startled me.”
 - e. “I could feel the strain all over my body as nerves grew tighter and tighter.”
2. Below are sentences taken from the seventh grade annotated passage from Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*. The sentences have been altered from the original so that you can combine two sentences, rewriting one of them as a dependent clause.
 - a. Frightened was the way he had felt a year ago. An unidentified aircraft had overflowed the community twice.
 - b. His little sister, Lily, was at the Childcare Center. She spent her after-school hours there.
 - c. Occasionally, supplies were delivered by cargo planes to the landing field across the river. Then the children rode their bicycles to the riverbank and watched, intrigued.

Appositives

The appositive, a noun that refers to, and helps explain, another noun, [note the appositive] is remarkably useful for concision and variety in sentence structure. An appositive or appositive phrase will occur directly after the noun it is referring to or, at times, directly before it at the start of a sentence.

This sentence – from the ninth grade annotated passage from *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher* – contains an appositive:

“The inventor of the work, Alan Sonfist, arranged and rearranged the location of food sources in different places....”

3. Using the following pairs of sentences, combine the sentences by turning one into an appositive. These sentences, altered, are taken from *The Lives of a Cell* passage:
 - a. A gallery in New York exhibited a collection of 2 million insects.
The insects were live Central American army ants.
 - b. The New Yorkers watched the army ants with intensity. The New Yorkers were a collection themselves of winter-carapaced people.
 - c. The ants were linked together with the New Yorkers. The ants created an abstraction, a live mobile, an action painting, a piece of found art, a happening, a parody, depending on the light.
4. a. Try introducing and ending the appositive with dashes instead of commas.
b. How does the use of dashes rather than commas alter the effect of the sentences?

Participles and Participial Phrases

Basically, a participle is a verb that functions as an adjective. Present participles end in –ing, and past participles usually, but not always, end in –ed. A participle is a handy way of reducing a whole clause to one word, thus producing the most concise expression possible. For instance, these two sentences may be combined using a participle:

The man was terrified. He clung to the ledge and tried to claw his way to the summit. *With a participle:* Terrified, the man clung to the ledge and tried to claw his way to the summit.

5. Combine the sentences below by using participles. The following sentences are taken from the ninth grade passage *The Lives of a Cell*:
 - a. They were displayed on sand in a huge square bin. The bin was walled by plastic sides high enough to prevent them from crawling over and out into Manhattan.
 - b. The ants formed themselves into long, black, ropy patterns. These patterns extended like writing limbs, hands, fingers, across the sand in crescents, crisscrosses, and long ellipses, from one station to another.
 - c. I can imagine the people moving around the edges of the plastic barrier. The people are touching shoulder to shoulder. They are sometimes touching hands. They are exchanging bits of information. They are nodding. They are smiling sometimes. They are prepared to take flight at a moment's notice.



The sentences in *c*, which in the passage are combined to create one sentence, strikingly illustrate the value of participles. Seven simple sentences sound choppy, disjointed. Inexperienced writers often write this way – one simple sentence after another. One of the quickest and easiest methods for a writer to achieve elegance and concision is to use participles.

Absolute Phrases

This structure often becomes a favorite of student writers because of its unique rhythm and sound in the sentence. Basically, an absolute phrase contains both a noun and a participle. More simply put, an absolute phrase is a clause with the “was” or “were” omitted.

This example is taken from *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher*.

“I can imagine the people moving around the edges of the plastic barrier, ...ready to take flight at a moment’s notice, their mitochondria fully stoked and steaming.”

6. Combine the sentences to create an absolute phrase. Then finish the sentence with your own independent clause. The following examples are modified from all five annotated passages, grades 6-10:
 - a. His hairs were standing on end. He came tearing back.
 - b. The loudspeakers were rasping. The voice told them to leave their bicycles where they were.
 - c. Her legs were short. Her freckles were glowing. She bragged that she could beat me in the race.
 - d. The loan was completed. The exhibition was ready. The gallery in New York opened its one-colony show entitled “Patterns and Structures.”
 - e. The eels were hurrying to the sea. The occurrence was so absurd that it vaults out of the world of strange facts and into that startling realm where power and beauty hold sovereign sway. (You could also combine the two using a participial phrase.)

Composition – Style and Voice

Another way to learn to incorporate subordination into your own sentences is to look over a draft of an essay or story you are writing. With the help of your teacher or a classmate, find sentences where you could have used subordination for concision and variety, and combine these sentences by adding dependent clauses, appositives or appositive phrases, participles or participial phrases, and absolute phrases. Eventually, these valuable tools of style and voice will occur naturally in your writing.