Punctuating Adverb Clauses

Sample Errors

SAMPLE 1: X Whenever I need to go shopping I take the car to work.

SAMPLE 2: X You can't get onto the Internet, until the network is repaired.

What's the Problem?

An adverb clause is a dependent clause that answers the question when, where, why, or to what degree about the verb in a sentence. Dependent clauses can never stand alone; they must always be attached to an independent clause. Adverb clauses have one unique feature that sets them apart from all other clauses, independent or dependent: Adverb clauses can be inverted. That is, they can be moved from their normal position following the independent clause to a position preceding the independent clause. When this happens, they are called "introductory" or "inverted" clauses and must be set off from the rest of the sentence with a comma. This explains the problem in Sample 1. Whenever I need to go shopping should be followed by a comma and then the independent clause I take the car to work. When an adverb clause follows the independent clause, it should not be set off with a comma. In Sample 2, the writer has incorrectly placed a comma after the independent clause.

What Causes the Problem?

Some writers get confused because there is no rule requiring that writers should always use commas or never use commas with adverb clauses. What's important is the position of the adverb clause in the sentence. In a sentence that begins with an introductory adverb clause, the comma signals the reader where the introductory adverb clause ends and the main clause begins. When the adverb clause follows the main clause, no comma is needed because the adverb clause appears in the normal adverb position at the end of the sentence. In other words, adverb clauses require commas only when they are not in their normal position in a sentence.

Diagnostic Exercise

Correct all errors involving adverb clauses in the following paragraph using the first correction as a model. The number in parentheses at the end of the paragraph indicates how many errors you should find.

After everybody was asleep Monday night, there was a fire in the dorm next door.

Fortunately, a smoke-detector went off, when smoke got into the staircase. While the fire department was fighting the fire six rooms were totally destroyed. A friend of mine in another part of the building lost all her clothing, because of the smoke and water damage. If school officials close down the dorm she will have to find a new place to live. I heard they will make a decision tomorrow, as soon as they get a report from the fire inspectors. (5)
Fixing This Problem in Your Writing

The first step in correcting problems with adverb clauses is to identify them in your writing. Adverb clauses begin with subordinating conjunctions. Here is a list of the most common ones grouped according to meaning:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUBORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cause</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>as</td>
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<tr>
<td>because</td>
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<tr>
<td>since</td>
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<td>so that</td>
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<td><strong>Condition</strong></td>
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<td>assuming that</td>
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<td>until</td>
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<tr>
<td>when</td>
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<tr>
<td>whenever</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Here is a reliable tip for identifying adverb clauses:

**ADVERB CLAUSE MOVEMENT TIP:** If it is a clause and if you can move it, then it has to be an adverb clause. Adverb clauses are the only type of clause that can be moved from one part of the sentence to another.

Keep in mind that the use of commas depends on where the adverb clause is. If the adverb clause is in its normal position at the end of the sentence, do not use a comma. However, if the adverb clause has been inverted and placed at the beginning of the sentence, then be sure to set it off with a comma to show the reader where the independent clause begins.

**SAMPLE 1:**  
X Whenever I need to go shopping I take the car to work.

**TIP APPLIED:** I take the car to work whenever I need to go shopping.

We know that *Whenever I need to go shopping* is an adverb clause because it can be moved. Now, look at the position. If the adverb clause begins the sentence, set it off with a comma.

**CORRECTION:**  
Whenever I need to go shopping, I take the car to work.

**SAMPLE 2:**  
X You can't get onto the Internet, until the network is repaired.

**TIP APPLIED:** Until the network is repaired, you can't get onto the Internet.

If an adverb clause follows the independent clause, do not set it off with a comma.

**CORRECTION:**  
You can't get onto the Internet until the network is repaired.

Sometimes rules have exceptions. There is one type of adverb clause that should always be set off with a comma no matter where it appears in a sentence.

**CONTRAST TIP:** If an adverb clause conveys a sense of contrast by using the subordinating conjunctions *although*, *even though*, or *though*, the adverb clause must always be set off with a comma even if it is at the end of the sentence.

Here are examples of sentences containing these three subordinating conjunctions:

**EXAMPLE:** We decided to stop for the night, *although* it was still pretty early.

**EXAMPLE:** I didn't like the movie, *even though* everybody else thought it was terrific.
EXAMPLE:  I stayed up watching The Late Show, **though** I had a test in the morning.

As you can tell from the examples, *although, even though,* and *though* signal that the meaning of the adverb clause is contrary to what we would expect from the first part of the sentence.

**Sentence Practice 1**

In each of the following sentences, underline the adverb clause and correct the comma error. Confirm your answer by moving the adverb clause to another position in the sentence.

**EXAMPLE:** When we got the tests back, we all went out for coffee.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONFIRMATION:</th>
<th>We all went out for coffee <strong>when we got the tests back.</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. After we get the shipment we will have to inventory it.

2. We need to finish up, since it is almost time to quit.

3. Unless it looks like rain we will barbecue in the backyard.

4. They didn't have a reservation for us even though we had called ahead.

5. I will turn off the TV. As soon as I finish watching this program.

**Sentence Practice 2**

In each of the following sentences, underline the adverb clause and correct the comma error. Confirm your answer by moving the adverb clause to another position in the sentence.

**EXAMPLE:** I was upset, **because** I should have known better.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONFIRMATION:</th>
<th><strong>Because I should have known better,</strong> I was upset.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. When my roommate didn't return I called her parents to let them know.

2. Because the roads are dangerously slippery classes have been canceled.

3. I am going to go to that concert **although** I can't really afford it.

4. Until I get a new computer at home I'm going to have to work in the lab.

5. When it rains it pours.

**Sentence Practice 3**

Combine each pair of sentences by turning the second sentence into an adverb clause. Pick an appropriate subordinating conjunction from the list above. Underline the adverb clause, and show that it can be used both before and after the independent clause. Punctuate each version correctly.
EXAMPLE:  I need to hang up.  
I have to go to class now.

ANSWER:  I need to hang up because I have to go to class now.  
Because I have to go to class now, I need to hang up.

1. We have had water in our basement.  
   It started raining this fall.

2. We still lost the game.  
   We had a better team.

3. You should stay in bed.  
   Your cold gets better.

4. I returned your call.  
   I got your message.

5. I couldn't finish my paper.  
   I had done all the work.

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Editing Practice 1

In the following paragraphs, correctly punctuate each sentence that contains an adverb clause. The number in parentheses at the end of each paragraph indicates how many errors you should find.

Since I wanted to get into shape, I decided to buy a weight machine that I could use in my basement.

I picked the machine I wanted, after I had looked at about a dozen different kinds. Surprisingly, it had many features the other machines didn't have even though it was one of the cheaper ones. (2)

Unfortunately, I forgot to compare two things: the height of the weight machine and the height of my basement. When I finally assembled the metal monster I discovered that it was four inches higher than my basement ceiling. I was furious at myself, because I had made such a dumb mistake. As the thing was such a hassle to move I didn't want to haul it back to the store. As a last resort, I punched a hole through the sheet-rock ceiling. Whenever I go into the basement now I see this really ugly hole in my ceiling. Next time, I'll need to plan ahead. (4)

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Editing Practice 2

In the following paragraphs, correctly punctuate each sentence that contains an adverb clause. The number in parentheses at the end of each paragraph indicates how many errors you should find.
Although many people may not be aware of it, Pearl Buck was the first American woman to win a Nobel Prize in literature. After they had spent years as missionaries in China her parents returned to the United States for a short time in the early 1890’s, during which time Pearl was born. When she was just three months old Pearl returned to China with her parents. She grew up speaking Chinese, because her family lived among the Chinese rather than in a Western compound. (3)

While they were living in China there were many protests against the Western governments that had controlled China’s economy for years. Since she had lived among ordinary people Pearl was very aware of their daily struggles for bare survival. Because she had such a depth of personal experience in China her most famous novel, The Good Earth, reflected her compassion for the Chinese and their culture. When Pearl Buck died President Nixon said that she served as a “human bridge between the civilizations of the East and West.” (4)

**Editing Practice 3**

In the following paragraphs, correctly punctuate each sentence that contains an adverb clause. The number in parentheses at the end of each paragraph indicates how many errors you should find.

When I entered school last year, I had no idea what my major would be. Because I had many interests I couldn’t decide whether I should major in accounting, computer programming, health administration, or business management. In my first year, it didn’t make too much difference, because I had to get the core requirements out of the way. Now in my second year, I need to get ready to declare a major. Even after I had met with an academic advisor I could not make up my mind. I was undecided and stressed out for weeks. (3)

After I had whined about making up my mind all semester a friend had a long talk with me. Our discussion really helped me; because she told me to think about what I wanted to be doing ten years from now. Before we had this talk I had tended to think just about the subject I liked right now—not the sort of jobs I wanted to do after graduation. Admittedly it was a simple idea, but it never hit home, until I talked to someone else in the same situation. I finally decided that health administration would combine my interest in caregiving with my interests in finance, management, and technology. (4)
Identify Errors in Punctuating Adverb Clauses in Your Writing

_____ Identify adverb clauses by seeing if you can move the clause to either end of the sentence.

Correct Errors in Punctuating Adverb Clauses in Your Writing

_____ If the adverb clause is at the beginning of the sentence, be sure to separate it from the independent clause by a comma.

_____ If the adverb clause is at the end of the sentence, don't use a comma unless the adverb clause begins with although, even though, or though.

THE BOTTOM LINE

If you use an introductory adverb clause, be sure to set it off with a comma.