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CONJUNCTION JUNCTION: MAKING CONJUNCTIONS FUNCTION FOR YOU

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff
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Remember this great song from Schoolhouse Rock?

Conjunction Junction, what's your function?

Hooking up words and phrases and clauses.

Conjunction Junction, how's that function?

I got three favorite cars

That get most of my job done.

Conjunction Junction, what's their function?

I got "and," "but," and "or,"

They'll get you pretty far.

While these three conjunctions would get most school children pretty far, as legal writers, we need a more nuanced repertoire to help readers understand our meaning and how the words, phrases, and clauses we use relate to each other.

So, to help you better understand how to make conjunctions function, let's take a look at coordinating conjunctions, correlative conjunctions, and subordinating conjunctions to connect ideas.

Coordinating conjunctions

These conjunctions are used to join grammatically equal elements. The main coordinating conjunctions are *for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, *so*.¹ They coordinate because they draw equal attention to two or more ideas. You can use them to draw attention to equal words:

The speech was not vulgar, lewd, obscene, or plainly offensive.

Or equal phrases (a group of related words):

The government's actions violate the establishment clause unless, the government's action (i) has a secular legislative purpose, (ii) does not have the primary effect of either advancing or inhibiting religion, and (iii) does not result in an "excessive government entanglement" with religion.

Or equal clauses (a group of related words with both a subject and a verb):

The Federal Constitution limits the government's ability to abridge free



speech, but the Idaho Constitution grants to every person the right to speak freely.

In addition to creating equal emphasis on ideas in your sentence, coordinating conjunctions can be used to add variety to the length of sentences in a paragraph. Longer sentences are always useful if you want to avoid having the reader hear machine gun fire as he reads your writing. For instance,

The first ten amendments are the Bill of Rights. The First Congress proposed them to the several states on September 25, 1789. New Jersey ratified them on November 20, 1789. Virginia ratified them on November 3, 1791. Connecticut ratified them on April 19, 1939.

That paragraph is much more pleasant to read if you add coordinating conjunctions to vary the length:

*The first ten amendments are the Bill of Rights. The First Congress proposed them to the several states on September 25, 1789. New Jersey ratified them on November 20, 1789, **and** Virginia ratified them on December 15, 1791. **But**, Connecticut didn't ratify them until April 19, 1939.*

Don't go too far in the direction of combining every sentence. Remember, the occasional short sentence has punch and demands the reader's attention.

The first Congress proposed the Bill of Rights to the several states on September 25, 1789. Between November 20, 1789, and December 15, 1791, eleven of the states ratified the Bill of Rights. One hundred forty-eight years later, the last of the several states ratified the Bill of Rights. Connecticut takes its time!

Don't go too far in the direction of combining every sentence. Remember, the occasional short sentence has punch and demands the reader's attention.

Correlative conjunctions

Correlative conjunctions are also used to connect grammatically equal elements, but these conjunctions come in pairs: *either/or*, *neither/nor*, *not only/but also*, *whether/or*, *both/and*.

When using correlative conjunctions, make sure the phrases or clauses you are connecting are both grammatically equal (don't mix and match phrases and clauses). For example, don't say:

Wrong: *Her speech was either protected as political speech, or she could have been making a religious statement.*

Correct: *She was making either a political statement or a religious statement.*

The first sentence is incorrect because "protected as political speech" does not have a subject and a verb, so it's a phrase.



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“She could have been making a religious statement” has both a subject and a verb and is an independent clause.

Also, make sure the phrases and clause you’re joining are in parallel structure. Parallelism is the use of similar grammatical form for coordinated elements. In non-grammatician terms, this means you match nouns with other nouns, verbs with other verbs, prepositional phrases with prepositional phrase, and so on

Wrong: *Under the Open Meetings Law, the public is not only entitled to attend governmental meetings, but also to be given notice of the time, place, and subject matter of those meetings.*

Correct: *Under the Open Meetings Law, the public is entitled not only to attend governmental meetings, but also to be given notice of the time, place, and subject matter of those meetings.*

The first example is incorrect because the verbs are not in the same tense; in the second example the verbs are.

The use of parallelism is especially important when presenting long or complicated ideas to the reader.

Wrong: *The author claim that it was not only wrong to tell just one side of the story, but also people had the right to hear the other side of the story and that he could write what he wanted.*

Correct: *The author claimed not only that it was wrong to tell just one side of the story, but also that people had the right to hear the other side of the story and that he had the right to write what he wanted.*

The first example is more difficult to understand because the writer’s three ideas are in a mish-mash of grammatical forms. In the second example the writer has helped the reader follow her three ideas by using “that” to begin each idea and by using grammatically parallel clauses.

Subordinating conjunctions

Subordinating conjunctions are used when the elements of a sentence are not equal. These conjunctions introduce subordinate clauses and explain the clause’s relationship to the rest of the sentence. Common subordinating conjunctions include *after, although, as, as if, as long as, because, before, even though, if, in order that, now that, rather than, since, so that, than, that, though, unless, until, when, whenever, where, whereas, whether, while*.

Subordinate clauses are patterned like sentences; they have subjects and verbs. But, because these clauses include a sub-

ordinating conjunction, they cannot stand alone as sentences:

Although he yelled fire in the crowded theater.

Instead, we use subordinating conjunctions to create clauses that help the reader better understand the main clause of the sentence by explaining the when, where, or why.

Although he yelled fire in the crowded theater, the patrons exited in an orderly fashion.

Use subordinating conjunctions to let the reader know the sentence elements are not equal and to help you emphasize the more important idea. (Determining which is the more important idea is up to you.)

The speech was vulgar, lewd, obscene, and plainly offensive, but the court ruled it was protected.

Even though the speech was vulgar, lewd, obscene, and plainly offensive, the court ruled it was protected.

Conclusion

Using coordinating conjunctions, correlative conjunctions, and subordinating conjunctions can help your readers better understand your writing and your thoughts. They can also add nuance and balance to our writing.

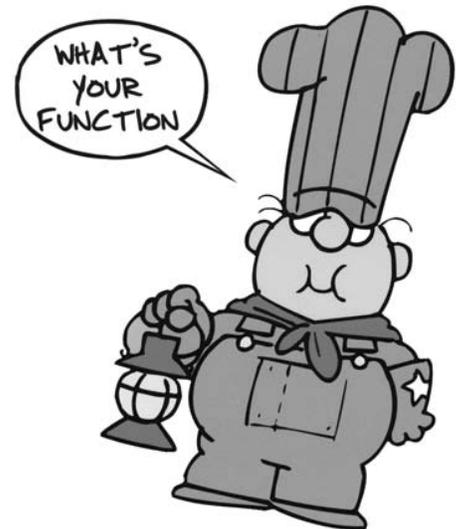
And, just in case the tune for Conjunction Junction has left your mind after this grammar lesson, I leave you with this verse:

In the mornings, when I’m usually wide awake, I love to take a walk through the gardens and down by the lake, where I often see a duck and a drake, and I wonder, as I walk by, just what they’d say if they could speak, although I know that’s an absurd thought.

About the Author

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff is a partner at Rainey Law Office. Her practice focuses on civil appeals. She was a visiting professor at University of Oregon School of Law teaching Legal Research and Writing, Advanced Legal Research, and Intensive Legal Writing and, prior to that,

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clerked for Justice Roger Burdick of the Idaho Supreme Court. While clerking for Justice Burdick, she authored *Idaho Legal Research*, a book designed to help law students, new attorneys, and paralegals navigate the intricacies of researching Idaho law. You can reach her at tfr@raineylawoffice.com.

Sources

- The lyrics for Conjunction Junction can be found at <http://www.school-houserock.tv/Conjunction.html>. You can also view the original Conjunction Junction at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODGA7ssl-6g>.
- Anne Enquist & Laurel Currie Oates, *Just Writing: Grammar, Punctuation, and Style for the Legal Writer* at 202-204 (3d ed. 2009).
- Bryan A. Garner, *The Redbook: A Manual on Legal Style* at 178-181 (2d ed. 2006).

Endnotes

¹ For a refresher on how to correctly punctuate independent clauses joined with these seven coordinating conjunctions, see “Six Simple Steps to Correct Commas,” *The Advocate* 49-50 (September 2011), available at <https://isb.idaho.gov/pdf/advocate/issues/adv11sep.pdf>.