units of grammatical meaning

The English language employs grammatical units of various sorts to convey meaning. These units, each with an identifiable grammar, are listed and discussed below.

> WORD
> PHRASE
> DEPENDENT CLAUSE
> INDEPENDENT CLAUSE
> SENTENCE

The key to analyzing the grammar of complex sentences is the recognition of these units. In their simplest forms, they are individual words.

The simplest sentence structures are organized by word unit:

> S + V
> S + AV + DO
> S + AV + IO + DO
> S + AV + DO + OC
> _____
>
> $\qquad$ PN
> S + LV + SC $<$
> $\qquad$ PA

Each of these structures can be complicated with the addition of modifiers, resulting in a wide range of sentences that nevertheless convey meaning at the level of individual words:

> M + M + M + S + M + V + M + M + IO + M +M + DO
> The fluffy red kitten shyly gave her green brother a playful swipe.

These structures are complicated when we recognize that phrases and dependent clauses (and sometimes independent clauses) function as though single parts of speech –single words. Each phrase and clause has an internal grammatical structure that can be readily identified, **and** each functions as though a noun, adjective, or adverb.

<u>Phrases</u>

Phrases do not have both subject and predicate. The phrases most frequently encountered include

Prepositional phrases (Preposition + Object of Preposition)

As units of meaning, prepositional phrases function as modifiers: they act adjectivally or adverbially. Once in a blue moon they function as nouns: *(Before dinner) is a hungry time*.

The structure of prepositional phrases can be complicated in several ways; the most obvious include:
- double or triple prepositions (*instead of* trouble)
- modifiers within the phrase (by *the big old burned down* bridge)
- and multiple objects (between *you* and *me*) or (after *dinner* and *dessert*)

Gerund phrases

As units of meaning, gerund phrases always function as nouns.

Gerunds can function alone as single words, but they often function as phrases that have numerous possible structures:
- gerund + modifier(s)
- gerund + object(s)
- gerund + complement(s) {with linking verbals}
- gerund + M + O + O, etc.

Participial phrases

As units of meaning, participial phrases always function as adjectives.

Participles can function alone as single words, but they often function as phrases with structures comparable to those formed by gerunds.

Infinitive phrases

As units of meaning, infinitive phrases can function as adjectives, adverbs, or nouns.

Infinitives can function alone as single words, but they often function as phrases with structures comparable to those formed by gerunds and participles. They are especially complex because they may or may not have pseudo subjects, and at times they are used without the infinitive identifier "to."

Clauses

Clauses differ from phrases by having both *subject* and *predicate* within the structure of the clause. Clauses most frequently encountered include

Relative clauses

As units of meaning, relative clauses normally function as adjectives or nouns; infrequently they function as adverbs.

Relative clauses most often begin with a relative pronoun – *who* (*whom, whose,* & the . . . *evers*), *which, what,* (and the . . . *evers*) and *that. That* can also be a subordinate conjunction.

Identification of relative clauses can be complicated when the clause opens with a preposition followed by relative pronoun. Relative clauses can be impacted (when two clauses are crammed into one).

Relative clauses can also open with relative adverbs, *when, where,* and *why.* This is difficult because these same words are more often subordinate conjunctions. When used as relative adverbs, the resulting clause will function adjectivally.

Subordinate clauses

As units of meaning, subordinate clauses normally function as adverbs or nouns; infrequently they function as adjectives.

The list of subordinating conjunctions is long. You should familiarize yourself with the standard conjunctions, but more important is the recognition of relative pronouns. If you identify a dependent clause

and it does not begin with a relative pronoun, it will most likely be subordinate.

Identification of subordinate clauses can be made difficult by double or triple conjunctions such as "as if," "now that," and "as soon as."

That presents a problem because, depending upon context, it can be a subordinating conjunction or relative clause. Remember that when used as a pronoun, *that* will function as a noun replacement – as a subject, direct or indirect object, predicate noun, or object of a preposition; as a subordinate conjunction, *that* won't do those things. Also, remember to employ Potter's Theorem.

Finally, subordinate clauses can be difficult to identify because of elliptical constructions – often clauses with the subordinating conjunction *that* dropped away.

Potter's Theorem

Potter's theory distinguishes between relative and subordinate clauses which use "that" by substituting "which" for "that." In relative clauses the switch will make sense.