Definitions

Clause: An expression that contains a subject and a verb. There are two kinds of clauses, and here's what they look like:

Independent clauses	*Dependent clauses*
I see	unless I see
they discussed the contract	after they discussed the contract
the printer is malfunctioning	if the printer is malfunctioning

Dependent clause: A clause that begins with a word like *when, because, after, before, until, unless, since, although, whenever,* or *if*. The dependent clause isn't a full-fledged sentence. It's called "dependent" because its sense depends on how it's attached to an independent clause. Here are a few more examples of dependent clauses:

whenever I try to read her writing	because his brain was damaged
until we document the problem	after we receive your proposal
before he joined the company	though we have heard nothing from them

Independent clause: The basic sentence. It's called "independent" because it can stand alone. Independent clauses look like this:

We interviewed 50 applicants.	The species is thriving.
These molecules are unstable.	When will you send the contract?
She finally faced the truth.	Answer the phone!

Clear: Let's use a practical definition. When the reader instantly gets your intended meaning, your sentence is clear. By that definition, if he has to read the sentence twice to get your intention, it isn't clear, but at least it manages to convey your thought. If the reader has to study the sentence for a time and remains unsure of what you mean, it's unclear.

If you write a sentence that logically expresses an idea you don't intend, it makes no sense to refer to that sentence as "clear," regardless of how perfectly it conforms to the conventions of the language, and regardless of whether the reader manages to guess correctly at your meaning.

Romanov's novel *Shiny* won the National Book Award.

Romanov's novel, *Shiny*, won the National Book Award.

Each of those sentences expresses a clear meaning, but the meanings differ. If you intend to indicate that Romanov has written only one novel, then the second version is what you must write. Given what you intend to convey, we'd say that the first one isn't clear, even though it does clearly express a thought.

One more example:

As her sources of inspiration, Ms. Growlie mentioned her two sisters, Mother Teresa and Joan of Arc.

> As her sources of inspiration, Ms. Growlie mentioned her two sisters, Mother Teresa, and Joan of Arc.

Each of those expresses a clear thought as well. But the first one implies that Mother Teresa and Joan of Arc are Ms. Growlie's sisters—and if you mean that Ms. Growlie mentioned four sources of inspiration, then you must write the second one. Again, using our definition of clarity, we would have to say that the first one fails the test of being clear.

Conjunction: A word used to connect ideas. There are several distinct groups of conjunctions, and of course each group has a scary name.

> ***Coordinating conjunction:*** *and, but, or, so, nor, for, yet,* and *as* are the coordinating conjunctions in English. We use them to connect words (*precise* and *thorough*), phrases (*from IBM* or *from Hewlett-Packard*), and clauses (*Resistance is futile,* but *you can still complain*).
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> ***Conjunctive adverb:*** *however, therefore, moreover, otherwise,* and *nevertheless* are examples of the many conjunctive adverbs. They serve as transitions between independent clauses. Don't concern yourself with why they're called adverbs; all you need to do is know how to punctuate one when you use it.
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> ***Correlative conjunction:*** *either/or, neither/nor,* and *not only/but also* are the most common correlative conjunctions. They come in pairs and they serve to set up either comparison or contrast.
>
> ***Subordinating conjunction:*** *because, when, if, unless,* and *although* are examples. There are dozens of them in English, and they're used to begin clauses. The only thing you need to know is that when you begin a clause with one of these words, that clause is dependent and can't stand alone.

Convention: What a group (in this case, speakers of English) decides is the normal or standard way of doing something. It's conventional, for example, to begin a sentence with a capital letter, use *I* (not *O*) for the first-person pronoun, and form possessives with *'s*. Convention de-

termines how we engineer meaning in all aspects of language. And it's from convention that we derive ideas of what's correct and incorrect.

Correct: I'm going to set a high standard for "correctness." We are not going to use the English teacher's abstract definition that requires only correctness of form. If we evaluate form alone, the following sentence is correct:

> The annual AARP membership fee is $10, which includes a spouse at no extra charge.

There's nothing wrong with form: nothing is misspelled, grammar is perfect, and punctuation is fine. The only thing wrong with the sentence is that it says something, perfectly clearly, that the writer does not mean: that for 10 bucks you get a spouse. For our purposes, that sentence is "incorrect"—and this is because our purposes are practical (not abstract, academic, or philosophical).

In the practical world, you must not be satisfied with any sentence until it meets this definition of correctness: the sentence both conforms to the standards and, according to the conventions of meaning, embodies your intent. (I use "embodies" instead of "conveys" because whether the reader grasps the intent is beyond your control.)

> The task force is searching for the F-117 lost over the Red Sea.

> The task force is searching for the F-117, lost over the Red Sea.

Both of those are correct *in form*, but the first expression indicates that more than one F-117 is missing; the second indicates that only one F-117 is missing. In this case, if you intend the first thought but write the second expression, the sentence fails the test of correctness. I realize that this is a rugged standard, but it's the one that counts.

Emphatic: Describes an expression that nails the writer's intended emphasis. Only the writer knows what she wishes to emphasize and how much emphasis each idea deserves. Some structures of language could be punctuated in several different ways, and the alternative we

choose should indicate the nuance we intend. Thus, while all three of the examples below are clear and correct *in form*, only one of them can be emphatic. If I want you to regard *though he may have been joking* as a very minor point, my intent requires parentheses.

> He said, though he may have been joking, that the idea struck him while he was stuck in traffic.
>
> He said (though he may have been joking) that the idea struck him while he was stuck in traffic.
>
> He said—though he may have been joking—that the idea struck him while he was stuck in traffic.

Intention: What you want your expression to mean to your reader. I'm going to use "intended meaning," "intention, and "intent" interchangeably.

Mishandled punctuation often twists or conceals the writer's intention. In the examples below, assume that the writer intends the meaning of the second expression. In each case, the words are in the right order, but the meaning is hidden.

Richard needs to be careful:	She is dressed to kill Richard.
Richard is being addressed:	She is dressed to kill, Richard.
Severnius is described (and probably displeased):	Members of the panel include Professor Severnius, a vampire fetishist and a convicted embezzler.
Severnius is now one of three:	Members of the panel include Professor Severnius, a vampire fetishist, and a convicted embezzler.
The intention is puzzling:	Change each issue to matter.
The intention is made plain:	Change each "issue" to "matter."

List: A series of ideas. The most common lists consist of nouns, verbs, adverbs, or adjectives. Here's what simple lists look like:

nouns	They have offices in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Dallas.
verbs	We collected, tested, analyzed, and classified the water samples.
adverbs	She handled the problem quickly, thoroughly, and professionally.
adjectives	We commend her for her quick, thorough, and professional response.

You can list anything—full sentences, clauses, phrases, citations, equations, you name it. The many shapes of lists are punctuated in differing ways. For a thorough discussion of lists, see the appendix, "How to List Ideas."

Parenthetical expression: An expression you could cut from the sentence without damaging your primary intent. It's called "parenthetical" because it merely adds a little qualifying information or description. (The term comes directly from the Greek *parenthesis*, which means literally "putting in beside.") Here are a few examples, with the parenthetical expressions in italics. Note that these expressions are always punctuated.

> Eli Yingling *(the company's former chief of security)* has agreed to testify.
>
> The central bank lowered its federal funds rate—*the rate it charges banks for overnight loans*—by three-quarters of a percentage point.
>
> The CFO, *aghast at the expense*, quickly ended the policy.

Parenthetical expressions sometimes appear at the beginning and ending of sentences.

> *According to witnesses*, the postman bit the dog.

> She had divorced for the fifth time when she wrote her first book, *The Joys of Nagging*.

To keep matters simple (and because it does no harm whatsoever), I'm going to call the italicized stuff below "parenthetical" too.

> *Glaring at the judge*, the defense attorney closed his mouth and sat down.

> Five crows sat on the telephone wires, *looking like notes on a sheet of music*.

Purists of grammar would differ with me on what to call those expressions, but that's okay. The practical point is that the phrases could be removed from the sentences without damaging the primary intent. All you need to do is recognize that, and you'll understand that you need to punctuate them.

Primary intent: The main idea of the sentence; the main thought you want to convey. This is a grammatical consideration that comes into play only when you begin adding non-essential words. In *He was terrified of his third-grade teacher*, every word is essential to meaning. The primary intent is the same in *He was terrified of his third-grade teacher, Sister Beatrice*. The phrase *Sister Beatrice* serves merely to name the teacher. Because it could be removed from the sentence without affecting the primary meaning, it must be punctuated.

Punctuation: (1) A bunch of impossible-to-figure-out marks, invented by the devil to give writers a foretaste of hell, taught in a hundred confusing and contradictory ways. (2) A code, used in writing, that is often necessary for meaning and for emphasis. The code originated in attempts to capture, in text, the various stops, pauses, and inflections of speech. Today it is logical in application. Both writers and readers need to understand it and pay attention to it.

Reader: A person whose job is to apply his intellect to what's written on the page in an honest attempt to understand the writer's intention.

He is not responsible for reading the writer's mind; his responsibility begins and ends with reading what the writer has actually put on the page. When he lacks a sufficient grasp of how language engineers meaning, then it doesn't matter how well the text is written.

Restrictive and non-restrictive expressions: A restrictive expression limits meaning. If I have more than one brother, I write *My brother Paul lives in Scotland*. The word *Paul* restricts the meaning of *brother* by specifying the brother I'm talking about. *Paul* is not parenthetical; it's necessary to my meaning and it isn't punctuated.

On the other hand, if I have only one brother, I write *My brother, Paul, lives in Scotland*. In this case, because I have only one brother, the word *Paul* doesn't serve to identify a particular brother but only to tell you what my brother's name is. In this case, *Paul* is parenthetical, or *non-restrictive*. The word could be removed from the sentence, and to show you that, I put commas around it. The sentence is correct *in form* with or without commas; punctuation here is a matter of being accurate in what you imply.

Writer: A person whose duty is to be clear. This is a moral and ethical obligation, and every decision (from word choice to format) must spring from it. When a writer lacks a sufficient grasp of how language engineers meaning, then her ethics, however virtuous they may be, are irrelevant.

"You moron!" (1) What a reader shouts at a writer who, for any of a number of reasons, has failed to make his meaning plain. (2) What a writer shouts at a reader who, for any number of reasons, has misunderstood a structure of language that would instantly be clear to everyone else. (3) What both writer and reader shout at one another when each party believes his point of view is justified and the other's is ridiculous.

To avoid the circumstances that provoke this shout, both writer and reader must satisfy two conditions. First, they must agree on how structures of language create meaning and suggest emphasis—for ex-

ample, they must agree that *employee's rights* and *employees' rights* have different meanings and they must agree on what those meanings are. They must also agree that *vegetarian octogenarian* emphasizes one's age, while *octogenarian vegetarian* emphasizes one's diet. In other words, they have to share a sense of the conventions of the language. Second, they must cooperate. The writer must do his utmost to make his meaning plain to the readers he's actually addressing. The reader must approach the text in good faith, with the assumption that the writer is doing his utmost to convey an idea, that every word on the page is there for a reason, and that nothing important has been left out.

Yunder: The place where pure and perfect meaning resides. It's just down the street from Valhalla.

In the practical world, the chief weakness of meaning is that it exists only in an isolated and imperfect human mind. Thus it is always a private matter and is always somewhat dented, rumpled, and wrinkled by the particular inflections of that mind. The onerous reality is that human minds are not merely incapable of telepathy, but are fallible in other ways: prone to error, hasty in judgment, sometimes deceptive, eager to argue, keen on showing off, fond of rationalizing, and quick to blame others. This is what accounts for the incessant cries of "You moron!" in every workplace.

But in the bright halls of Yunder, meaning floats free and pure, unadulterated by incarceration in a human intellect. When a writer is certain she has made her meaning plain, she believes she has snatched her expression straight from Yunder. When a reader struggles to understand a writer's intent and rephrases it until he finally grasps it, he bitterly assumes that his rephrasing is certainly verbatim from Yunder. It's a pity that no earthly visa can gain us entrance there. Even a brief visit would settle a lot of arguments.

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