

Coordinating Conjunctions

WHAT ARE COORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS?

Coordinating conjunctions are probably the most common way to transition between two ideas. Grammatically, coordinating conjunctions are used to join two independent clauses (complete sentences) into one sentence. Using coordinating conjunctions correctly can help you clearly articulate the relationship between two ideas.

One common acronym to help you remember the most popular coordinating conjunctions is FANBOYS, which stands for: **F**or **A**nd **N**or **B**ut **O**r **Y**et **S**o

HOW DO COORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS WORK?

Coordinating conjunctions, combined with a comma, join two independent clauses (clauses that contain both a subject and a verb, aka complete sentences) into one sentence. Unlike a semi-colon, a coordinating conjunction tells your reader something specific about the relationship between the two ideas:

For means that the second clause is the cause of the first.

The Bennet sisters could not find husbands, for their dowries were very small.
(Small dowries are the reason that the Bennet sisters cannot find husbands)

And links two similar ideas.

Jane was beautiful, and Mr. Bingley was besotted with her.

Nor is only used when joining two negative clauses.

Mr. Darcy did not dance, nor did he make small talk.
(Note that in the second clause, the subject-verb order is inverted and “not” is omitted: “he did not make small talk” becomes “nor did he make small talk”)

But implies a contrast between the two clauses.

Marrying Mr. Collins would have secured the Bennet girls’ inheritance, but Elizabeth still refused him.

Or means that the two clauses are opposites or alternatives to one another.

Lydia’s honor had to be preserved, or the whole family would be doomed.

Yet, like but, contrasts the two clauses but implies a stronger or more startling contrast.

Elizabeth hated Mr. Darcy, yet she couldn’t deny that his estate at Pemberley was beautiful.

So means that the first clause causes the second.

She realized she was in love with him, so when he proposed again, she accepted.
(The realization is the reason she accepted the proposal)

The correct coordinating conjunction greatly affects the meaning of the sentence. If the sixth example read: *Elizabeth hated Mr. Darcy, for she couldn’t deny that his estate at Pemberley was beautiful*, it would mean something entirely different.

SO, WHEN DO I USE A COMMA?

Because coordinating conjunctions are often used in a variety of ways, it's easy to get confused as to when they require a comma. However, the rule itself is quite simple: coordinating conjunctions require a comma when they join two independent clauses (clauses with both a subject and a verb, aka complete sentences). This is the case in all the examples on the previous side of this handout.

In the example below, the subjects of each clause/sentence are bolded and the verbs are underlined:

Elizabeth hated Mr. Darcy, yet **she** couldn't deny that his estate at Pemberley was beautiful.
could become

Elizabeth hated Mr. Darcy. **She** couldn't deny that his estate at Pemberley was beautiful.

This usage can get confusing, though, when coordinating conjunctions are used to join independent and dependent clauses. For instance, the example above could be written as:

Elizabeth hated Mr. Darcy yet couldn't deny that his estate at Pemberley was beautiful.

If this sentence were divided, the second clause would be incomplete.

Elizabeth hated Mr. Darcy. Couldn't deny that his estate at Pemberley was beautiful (sentence fragment).

In this case, the first clause has both a subject and a verb (*Elizabeth hated*), but the second clause has only a verb (*couldn't deny*). *Yet* still acts as a coordinating conjunction, but because it is not connecting two independent clauses, it does not need a comma.

WHAT ABOUT OTHER WORDS?

There are several other transitional prepositions that are very similar to the major coordinating conjunctions. The rules governing words like *because*, *although*, *however*, *while*, and *therefore* are somewhat more nebulous than the rules for FANBOYS. Partially, this is because these other prepositions can be used in multiple ways.

For example, one could say either:

The Bennet sisters could not find husbands because their dowries were very small

or

Because their dowries were very small, the Bennet sisters could not find husbands.

But one could not say:

For their dowries were very small, the Bennet sisters could not find husbands.

Because (and words like it) are subordinating words – they automatically make the clause they are attached to dependent on the rest of the sentence. Therefore, when *because* comes in the middle of a sentence, it does not need a comma. When a sentence begins with *because*, however, a comma should separate the two clauses (in the example above, between *small* and *the Bennet sisters*).

Confused yet? Don't worry. You're not alone. The grammar rules covering words like *because*, *although*, *however*, *while*, and *therefore* are highly stylistic and vary according to format and discipline.