TERMS TO KNOW: Vital Sentence Elements

SENTENCE: A group of words that names at least one person or thing and expresses a complete thought about it. (The same definition applies to independent and main clauses.)

Ex: The mouse ran up the clock.

SUBJECT: The part of a sentence that names what the sentence is about. The complete subject includes a noun or pronoun plus the words that describe it. The simple subject is the unadulterated noun or pronoun.

Ex: The little gray mouse ran up the clock.

Some sentences have compound subjects, which contain two or more simple subjects:

Ex. The little gray mouse and its cousin ran up the clock together.

PREDICATE: The part of a sentence that tells what the subject does, or what it is, or what happens to it. At the very least, the predicate must contain a verb, and it usually includes additional words to complete the thought of the sentence (the complement). A compound predicate contains more than one verb.

Ex: The little gray mouse ran up the clock and jumped down onto the piano.

VERB: An essential part of every sentence – the word that tells what the subject does, what it is, or what happens to it. The verb is the word in the predicate that changes to indicate what tense (time frame) it is expressing.

Ex: All the little gray mice run in a pack. (present tense verb)
Yesterday, one of the mice ran up the clock in record time. (past tense)

Auxiliary (helping) verbs: Usually some form of BE, DO, or HAVE that combines with the base form of another verb to help it express what happens to the subject.
Ex: One little mouse has run out of steam. (has = auxiliary verb)

TERMS TO KNOW: Clauses and Sentence Types

INDEPENDENT CLAUSE (sometimes called MAIN CLAUSE): group of words that consists of a subject and predicate (including a verb) and makes a complete statement. Every sentence must contain at least one independent clause, and an independent clause can stand alone as a sentence.

verb

Ex: The cow jumped over the moon.

subject predicate

DEPENDENT CLAUSE (sometimes called SUBORDINATE CLAUSE): group of words that contains a subject and a verb, but does not make a complete statement -- so it's not a sentence.

Some dependent clauses start with relative pronouns (who, whom, whose, which, that). These are called relative clauses, and they act as adjectives, modifying the noun or pronoun that comes before them.

Ex: Old McDonald's cow, which must have been on steroids, jumped over the moon.

Other dependent clauses start with subordinate conjunctions (such as after, although, because, before, if, since, when, while and many others). Putting a subordinate conjunction at the beginning of the clause makes it sound incomplete; it depends on something else to complete its meaning.

Ex: Because she was looking for greener pastures, (dependent clause — not a complete thought)

Because she was looking for greener pastures, the cow jumped over the moon.

dependent clause independent clause

NOTE: Without the word “because,” the clause “she was looking for greener pastures” could stand alone as an independent clause; it would be a complete sentence. The addition of “because” or any other subordinate conjunction is what makes the clause sound incomplete.

A dependent clause that is not attached to an independent clause is just a partial sentence; it is one type of sentence fragment.

COMPOUND SENTENCE: Has two or more independent clauses joined by a semicolon or by a comma plus coordinating conjunction (and, or, but, for, yet, so).

Ex: The cow jumped over the moon; NASA decided to investigate.