Sentence boundaries, colons and nonessential information

Original skill preparation; versioned source scope

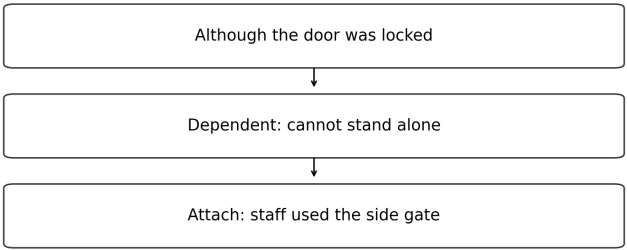
Sentence Boundaries, Colons and Nonessential Information

- Mark a **sentence boundary** 句子边界 between two **independent clauses** 独立分句.
- Avoid a **comma splice** 逗号拼接错误 and a run-on sentence.
- Use a **colon** 冒号 only after a complete clause.
- Set off a **nonessential element** 非限定成分 with a matching pair of marks.

The clause test

- An independent clause has a subject and a verb and can stand alone: "Its clock still worked."
- A dependent clause starts with a word like "although", "because", "when" or "which" and cannot stand alone.
- Test each side of the punctuation mark: can it stand alone as a sentence?

Figure: The clause test



- Worked steps: Although the door was locked → Dependent: cannot stand alone → Attach: staff used the side gate
- Match each part of the diagram to the text.

Joining or separating clauses

- Two independent clauses: full stop; semicolon; or comma plus and, but, or, so, yet, for, nor.
- An introductory dependent clause is followed by a comma: "Although the station was closed, its clock still worked."
- "However" and "therefore" need a semicolon or full stop before them when they start a new clause.

Colons and dashes

- A colon must follow a complete independent clause. After it comes a list, an explanation or an example.
- Wrong: "One part needed: a replacement." The verb "needed" has not got its object yet.
- A single dash can do the same job as a colon; a pair of dashes marks an interruption.

Essential and nonessential information

- Nonessential information adds detail but does not identify which one: "The clock, which stood above the entrance, had become a meeting point."
- Mark it with two commas, two dashes or two brackets: never one of each.
- Essential information identifies the noun and takes no commas: "The clock that stood above the entrance was restored; the other was not."

Practice passage

- **Editing passage.** Although the old station was closed [1] its clock still worked.
- The mechanism was simple [2] however, repairing the hands required a specialist.
- One part needed replacement [3] the narrow axle behind the dial.
- The clock [4] which stood above the entrance [5] had become a meeting point.

Worked example: five marks

1. Comma: "Although the old station was closed" is an introductory dependent clause.
2. Semicolon (or a full stop and "However"): both sides are independent clauses.
3. Colon: "One part needed replacement" is complete, and the axle explains it.
4. and [5] Commas (or two dashes): the which-clause is nonessential, since there is only one clock.

Worked example: agreement inside punctuation

- The subject is "the clock … and the bell": two things, so the verb is "were".
- "The clock above the entrance and the bell were restored."
- Commas around "above the entrance" are possible only if it is extra information; they do not change the agreement.

Common errors

- Joining two independent clauses with only a comma.
- Putting a colon after a verb or a preposition.
- Opening nonessential information with a comma and closing it with a dash.

Common errors (2)

- Putting commas round essential information.
- Missing the comma after an introductory dependent clause.

Key terms

- **sentence boundary**: The point where one complete sentence ends and the next begins.
- **independent clauses**: Groups of words with a subject and a verb that can stand alone as sentences.
- **comma splice**: Two independent clauses joined by a comma alone.
- **colon**: A mark (:) that follows a complete clause and introduces an explanation or list.

Check yourself

- Correct: "The bus was late, we walked."
- Is this correct: "She bought: apples, pears and plums."?
- Punctuate: "My brother who lives in Shanghai is a nurse." (I have only one brother.)