Grammar Quickie Sheet

Clauses & Phrases

An independent clause is a clause that can stand by itself. It is a complete sentence, meaning it has, at the very least, a subject and a verb.

Many students attended the club meeting. ["Students" is the subject, "attended" is the verb. As long as a sentence has these two parts, it can be considered an independent clause, or a complete sentence.]

A dependent clause is a clause that adds information to an independent clause, but cannot stand on its own, meaning it is not a complete sentence. Like the independent clause, it does have a subject and a verb, but a dependent word turns it into a dependent clause. Think of it as being "dependent" on an independent clause.

Although the event was after school, many students attended the club meeting. [The word "Although" is a dependent word in that it makes that part of the sentence into a dependent clause – one that cannot stand on its own, but adds info to the independent clause after it. Notice also that a comma is needed to join the opening dependent clause to the independent clause. If the dependent clause comes after the independent clause, a comma is not needed. Ex: Many students attended the club meeting even though it was after school.]

A phrase generally refers to a group of words that does not have a subject and verb, but nonetheless adds information to a sentence. Like the dependent clause, it cannot stand alone and must be attached to an independent clause.

At the end of the school day, some students head straight to work. ["At the end of the school day" is a phrase in that it cannot stand alone and does not have a subject and verb combination.]

Commas, Commas, Commas...

Commas are generally used to indicate short stops in a sentence, though they must be used in specific ways to avoid cases of insufficient punctuation, such as commas splices and run-on sentences.

A comma splice occurs when two independent clauses are joined with a comma. A comma is insufficient punctuation in this case, and either a semicolon or a comma with "and" can be used to fix it.

Some students have extracurricular activities to attend after school, other students head straight to work. [Notice that you can identify the subject and verb of each independent clause. Use a semicolon or add "and" to fix: Ex. Some students have extracurricular activities to attend after school, and other students head straight to work.]

A run-on sentence is when two independent clauses are joined without punctuation.

Some students have extracurricular activities to attend after school other students head straight to work. [This also includes two independent clauses that have no punctuation between them. To correct this, you can use the same methods as those indicated above to fix a comma splice.]
...And Their Friend, The Semi-Colon

Semicolons are used in two instances, most commonly in the first: (1) to separate two independent clauses (as shown in the examples for comma splices and run-ons), or (2) to separate long items in a list. Below is an example of the first situation, which is directly related to grammar.

Some students have extracurricular activities to attend after school; other students head straight to work.  
[Notice that both clauses are independent clauses, and thus each is a complete sentence. The semicolon serves as a punctuation stop, but not a full stop as with a period. Another option in the above sentence is to put a comma and “and,” which would still be sufficient punctuation to join the clauses. Remember, without the “and” it is a comma splice!]

Sentence Harmony: Making Sure Words Agree!

Agreement refers to words in a sentence relating to one another. Below are two common instances where words in a sentence might not agree.

Tense. The verbs in a sentence should follow the tense of the first verb presented.

Incorrect: She ran for class president, and she also holds positions in several student clubs.

Correct: She ran for class president, and she also held positions in several student clubs.

Singular, Plural. If a subject is singular or plural at the beginning of a sentence, any later reference to the subject in the sentence should match it.

Incorrect: A student said the tutoring center really helped them prepare for final exams.

Correct: A student said the tutoring center really helped him/her prepare for final exams. / Students said the tutoring center really helped them prepare for final exams.  
[Notice that you can correct it in one of two ways: By making both singular or both plural. You want to make sure that the option you choose makes the most sense for the context of your sentence. Stylistically, plural might be preferred since “him/her” can be considered wordy.]

Who Did What To Whom?

“Who” is the subject of a sentence in an instance where the person identified is doing an action. “Whom” is the object of a sentence in an instance where the person identified is the recipient of an action.

Who is going on a trip this year? / I am working with a student who came to see us last week.

[In the above examples, notice that the “who” is referring to someone performing an action.]

To whom am I speaking? / I am working with a student whom received tutoring last week.

[In the above examples, notice that the “whom” is referring to someone who is on the receiving end of an action.]