

**Johnson County Community College**

**Base Clause and Initial/Final Modifiers**

A sentence can be short--

Jesus wept.

Or it can be long--

It is not of the games children play in the evening that I want to speak now, it is of a contemporaneous atmosphere that has little to do with them: that of the fathers of families, each in his space of lawn, his shirt fishlike pale in the unnatural light and his face nearly anonymous, hosing their lawns.

--James Agee

Neither will be held up as a model for you to mimic. You are capable of the first example, and the second, while holding true to the principles contained in this unit, represents some further ground which you may reach long after you have completed this course of instruction. Instead, let us look at this sentence:

World War I began like a summer festival--all billowing skirts and golden epaulets.

--Dalton Trumbo

In addition to the base clause, the sentence contains a final modifier:

**1) Base (B):** World War I began like a summer festival--

**2) Final Modifier (FM):** all billowing skirts and golden epaulets.

The base clause contains the most general information in the sentence. The final modifier follows the natural word order and modifies a group of words in the base clause--specifically "summer festival." You should notice the treatment of the punctuation, the dash remaining with the base clause and the period indicated at the end of the second level final free modifier. Please note that the second level final free modifier cannot be a base clause because it cannot stand alone as a simple sentence.

In the following sentence we have both an initial free modifier and a final free modifier:

Sensing a possible rival, I watched him warily, wondering who he was.

--Ralph Ellison

2) **Initial Modifier (IM):** Sensing a possible rival,

1) **B:** I watched him warily,

2) **FM:** wondering who he was.

Both initial and final free modifiers modify the base clause. Each line ends with the punctuation which sets it off, and the word order follows as the sentence is written. **Notice the procedure of indenting the levels with the base clause positioned on the extreme left.** If any change in the above notation is allowed, the sentence will read incorrectly.

Because you build the notation around the base clause, locate the base clause first. Even though the answers required in exercises, quizzes and even tests are notations, you should underline the base clause first. Then you can more clearly see the free modifiers.

## Practice Exercises

Underline the base clause in each of the following sentences and notate the levels of generality (1=base clause; 2=initial/final modifiers).

1. An hour later, looking out of the window, I saw Grossbart headed across the field.

--Philip Roth

2. They toiled up the ill-lit narrow staircase, the teacher trailing them.

--Bernard Malamud

3. After he had entered the room, there was a crash as if he had kicked something out of his way.

--Flannery O'Connor

4. He looked completely round the room, as if in meditation, his eyes roving in their distance.

5. Taking up a strategic position, the man howled a challenge.

--Stephen Crane

6. He (the hawk) could sail for hours, searching the blanched grasses below him with his telescopic eye, gaining height against the wind, descending in mile-long gently declining swoops when he curved and rode back, never beating a wing.

--Walter Van Tilburg Clark

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