

Conjunctions & Relatives

Conjunctions

When parsing a text, your first step should be to identify verbs, noting which verbs are finite, as these govern one clause each. Next, you'll want to determine where one clause ends and the next begins, so you can tackle them one at a time. The editor's punctuation can be a shortcut here: a comma often signals the end of a clause (or the insertion of a subclause, see below); a colon, semicolon, or full stop normally does. But another common signpost signalling clausal transitions is the **conjunction**. Since Old English has only about 25 common conjunctions, memorizing them is an efficient way to improve your reading proficiency.

As a bonus, conjunctions also tell you how the clauses on either side of them relate to each other: **coordinating conjunctions** signal that they are of the same syntactic rank (e.g. PDE *and, but, or*), while **subordinating conjunctions** (*because, if, unless, while*) start off clauses that descend to lower levels in the syntactic hierarchy: why or under what conditions some action takes place is less important than what that action is, which is why we call the *because-* and *if-*clauses **subclauses**.

Coordinating	Sense	Subordinating	Sense
ac	but	ǣr	before
and	and	būtan	unless; except
ēac	also, moreover	forþām, forþon, forþȳ	because
(ge) ge	(both) and; also	forūtan	besides; except
nāhwæþer, nāþor	neither	gif	if
ne	neither; nor	hwæþer	whether
oþþe	or	nefne, nimþe	unless; except
(hwæþer ...) þe	or	nū	since, when
		ōþ	until
		siþþan	since
		swā	as
		þā	when
		þæt	that; so that; in order that
		þeah (þe)	although
		þenden	while
		þonne	when
		þȳ, þe	since

Please note that about half of these (*ǣr*, *būtan*, *ēac*, *forūtan*, *ne*, *nemne*, *nū*, *ōþ*, *sipþan*, *þā*) can also function as adverbs or prepositions; they don't always signal the end of a clause! Word order and editors' punctuation can help you out here.

Relatives

The other common way to start a subclause is with the use of **relatives**:

She hated the film **that** we saw.
We saw the film (acc.); she hated the film (acc.).

The waiter **who** served me was rude.
The waiter (nom.) served me; the waiter (nom.) was rude.

I saw the girl **whom** you sent that card.
You sent the girl (dat.) that card; I saw the girl (acc.).

Old English has three ways of expressing the relative, or really two that combine:

1. With just the relative particle *þe* (very common);
2. With the demonstrative pronoun *se*, *þæt*, *sēo*, *þā* immediately followed by the relative particle: *se þe* (or *seþe*), *þāem þe*, *þæs þe*, etc. (very common);
3. With just the demonstrative pronoun *se*, *þæt*, *sēo*, *þā* (not so common).

There is an important difference between the way the relative particle and the relative pronoun function: *þe* is **indeclinable**, meaning it does not inflect for gender, case, or number; it has just that one form. The pronoun, on the other hand, will agree in gender and number with the antecedent in the preceding clause (in the last example above, *whom* refers back to *girl*), but it is assigned case through its function in the clause that follows (here a dative, courtesy of the verb *to send*). This may be better demonstrated using a German example:

Das Leben ist ein Märchen, **dessen** Ende du selbst schreiben musst.
Märchen: nominative singular neuter
dessen: genitive singular neuter

As in German, the relative pronoun standing on its own will take its case from the clause that follows; when combined with *þe*, however, it often agrees with the first clause, the idea being that *þe* is the part of the relative construction that belongs to the second clause. The following examples demonstrate this dynamic.

Ic hit eom, **þe** wið ðe sprece.

Old English Tutorials

Ge synt **þe** mid me þurhwunedon on minum geswincum.

Mycel yfel deð **se ðe** leas writ.

An ælmihtig god is on þrym hadum æfre wunigende, **se þe** ealle þincg gesceop.

Seðe wyrgeð fæder oððe modor, se is deaðes scyldig.

He oncneow Lazarum **þone ðe** he ær forseah.

And eac ic ðe forgife **þæs ðe** ðu ne bæde.

Ða ealle **þa ðe** þæt gehyrdon miclum þæs wundrodon.

Þær is þæt unasecgenlice rice **þe** God syleþ **eallum ðæm þe** hine lufian willaþ.

Mann wæs fram Gode asend, **þæs** nama wæs Iohannes.

Her is ahangen se Nazarenisca hælend, **se** is Iudea cyning.

Don't forget that the spelling *þe* can also represent the personal pronoun form *þē* ('to you') or the demonstrative pronoun form *þȳ* ('thereby'); again, context is your friend.