Noun Clauses

A whole clause can do the job of a noun: be the subject, the object, or follow a preposition.

B1–C2 · Philo & Sophia, Lesson 25

What happened is the subject.

NOUN	Her news NOUN PHRASE · SUBJECT	surprised VERB	everyone. OBJECT
NOUN CLAUSE	What she told us NOUN CLAUSE · SUBJECT	surprised VERB	everyone. OBJECT

1 A noun clause fills a noun's place in the sentence.
2 It starts with **that**, a **wh- word**, or **if / whether**.
3 Inside it, use **statement order**, never question order.
4 As a subject, it takes a **singular verb**.

The jobs a noun clause can do

wherever a noun can go

JOB	STARTS WITH	EXAMPLE
subject	wh- word	**What she said** surprised everyone.
object	that (often left out)	I think **(that) it will rain**.
object	wh- word	I don't know **where the key is**.
object	if / whether	Ask him **whether the eggs are fresh**.
after be	that	The problem is **that we have no hay**.
after an adjective	that / whether	I'm sure **(that) she's right**. · I'm not sure **whether it's ready**.
after a preposition	wh- / whether	It depends on **how much it rains**.
after a noun	that	The news **that the farm was sold** shocked us.
wh- + to-infinitive	what, where, how…	I don't know **what to do**. · Show me **how to milk** her.
whatever, whoever	-ever words	Take **whatever you need**. · **Whoever finds the dog** gets a reward.

Test it: can you replace the clause with "it" or "something"? Then it is a noun clause

No question order

statement order inside

*Do you know **where the station is**?*
not ~~where is the station~~

*I wonder **if she likes** it.*
not ~~does she like~~

*Can you tell me **what time it is**?*

The question is in the main clause, not in the noun clause

that, if or whether?

fact or doubt

that for facts: *I know **that** he left.*

if / whether for yes or no: *I don't know **if** he left.*

Only **whether** at the start, after a preposition and before *to*: ***Whether** we go depends on the weather.*

whether or not: I'll go whether or not it rains

It … that

put the long part last

***It's** strange **that** he left so early.*

***It** doesn't matter **what** you think.*

***It's** a pity **that** the rain came so late.*

More natural than *That he left so early is strange.*

English likes short subjects and long endings

The subjunctive

C1–C2, formal

After *insist, suggest, essential*: the base verb.

*The vet insisted that the calf **be** kept warm.*

*It's essential that every gate **be** closed.*

British English also: *that the calf **should be** kept warm.*

No -s: that he go, that she be

When can you leave out that?

- After common verbs and adjectives in speech: *I think (that)…, I'm glad (that)…*
- Keep it at the start, after a noun (*the fact that*), and in formal writing.

Useful noun clauses

- *The fact is that… · The point is that… · What matters is…*
- *What I mean is… · Whether or not…, … · It's no surprise that…*

Spanish speakers, watch out

- *No sé dónde está* = I don't know **where it is**, not ~~where is it~~.
- *Lo que dijo* = **What** she said, not ~~The what she said~~.
- *Que llegara tarde me molestó* = **It annoyed me that** he arrived late.

Want more?

Sophia explains **What Happened Is the Subject** (Philo & Sophia, Lesson 25).

See also Grammar Guides 19 and 21.

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