

Us and Them

Personal Essay by David Sedaris

What's really **NORMAL?**

KEY IDEA Imagine a town where everyone dyes his or her hair purple and spends free time either at puppet shows or raising ferrets. If someone moves in who has brown hair and loves video games and soccer, would he or she be considered **normal**? What we mean by that word often depends on where we are and who we're with. In the selection you are about to read, a young boy is fascinated by a family that doesn't seem normal.

DISCUSS How do you define *normal*? Think about things like the way you and your friends and family dress, the music you listen to, and the activities you participate in. Create a definition for the word *normal* based on these observations, and compare it with classmates' definitions. Is everyone's view of *normal* the same?



LITERARY ANALYSIS: IRONY

Have you ever stayed up late to study for a test, only to find out that the test was postponed? Many people would call this turn of events ironic. **Irony** is a contrast between what is expected and what actually exists or happens. Irony can make a piece of literature tragic, thoughtful, or funny, depending upon the writer's goal. Types of irony include

- **situational irony**, which is a contrast between what is expected to happen and what actually does happen
- **verbal irony**, which occurs when someone states one thing and means another
- **dramatic irony**, which happens when readers know more about a situation or a character in a story than the characters do

As you read, record examples of irony in a chart as shown.

Example	Type of Irony	Why It's Ironic

Review: Tone

READING SKILL: EVALUATE

When you **evaluate**, you make judgments about the author's opinions, actions, or statements. Forming opinions on what you read makes you think about what's right and wrong, and why. As you read, judge whether the young David Sedaris's thoughts and actions seem sensible, fair, and accurate.

VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

The way Sedaris uses the following boldfaced words helps create the ironic **tone** of his story. Use context clues in each sentence to figure out the meaning of the boldfaced terms.

1. Lucy doesn't **merit** an invitation to my party.
2. Don't **imply** that you believe me if you really don't.
3. Carmen, don't **inflict** your terrible music on me!
4. Although I disagree, I won't **interfere** with your decision.
5. I **attribute** John's grades to hard work and dedication.
6. Taylor tosses her papers **indiscriminately** into her bag.
7. There's no way Mom can **accommodate** all of us in her tiny car.
8. If you **provoke** me, I will likely argue with you.

A Man of Many Jobs

David Sedaris has had several odd jobs over the years, including apple picking, house painting, performance art, and apartment cleaning. But a humorous essay he wrote about his experiences working as an elf in a department store's holiday display launched his writing career. After reading "The SantaLand Diaries" on National Public Radio, Sedaris became an instant hit, and since then his books have sold millions of copies. His inspiration comes from the diaries he has kept for over 30 years, in which he records his intelligent, funny, and emotional observations on everyday life.



David Sedaris
born 1957

Literary Rock Star Sedaris frequently tours the U.S. and Europe, reading his essays and short stories to sold-out concert halls. These appearances give Sedaris a chance to meet his fans and also to improve his writing. He often reads unpublished essays, revising them based on the crowd's reaction.

Family Secrets Many of Sedaris's essays are about the people in his life. His book *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim*, from which this essay was taken, contains thoughts on his family and childhood. In one essay, he writes that his family is afraid to tell him anything important for fear that their stories will end up in his next book. Most of their conversations, he says, begin with the words "You have to swear you will never repeat this." Fortunately for his readers, Sedaris doesn't make those promises.



MORE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For more on David Sedaris, visit the Literature Center at ClassZone.com.

Us and THEM

David Sedaris

When my family first moved to North Carolina, we lived in a rented house three blocks from the school where I would begin the third grade. My mother made friends with one of the neighbors, but one seemed enough for her. Within a year we would move again and, as she explained, there wasn't much point in getting too close to people we would have to say good-bye to. Our next house was less than a mile away, and the short journey would hardly **merit** tears or even good-byes, for that matter. It was more of a "see you later" situation, but still I adopted my mother's attitude, as it allowed me to pretend that not making friends was a conscious¹ choice. I could if I

10 wanted to. It just wasn't the right time. **A**

Back in New York State, we had lived in the country, with no sidewalks or streetlights; you could leave the house and still be alone. But here, when you looked out the window, you saw other houses, and people inside those houses. I hoped that in walking around after dark I might witness a murder, but for the most part our neighbors just sat in their living rooms, watching TV. The only place that seemed truly different was owned by a man named Mr. Tomkey, who did not believe in television. This was told to us by our mother's friend, who dropped by one afternoon with a basketful of okra.² The woman did not editorialize³—rather, she just presented her information, leaving her

20 listener to make of it what she might. Had my mother said, "That's the craziest thing I've ever heard in my life," I assume that the friend would have agreed, and had she said, "Three cheers for Mr. Tomkey," the friend likely would have agreed as well. It was a kind of test, as was the okra.

merit (mĕr'īt) v.
to deserve

A IRONY

Reread lines 6–10. When Sedaris says he could make friends if he wanted to, what does he actually mean?

ANALYZE VISUALS

Note the colors used in this painting. Why do you think the artist chose to **contrast** the inside and outside of the house in this way?

1. **conscious**: deliberate.

2. **okra** (ō'krə): edible pods used in soups and as a vegetable.

3. **editorialize** (ĕd'ĭ-tōr'ē-əl-īz'): to give one's own opinions on a topic.



To say that you did not believe in television was different from saying that you did not care for it. Belief **implied** that television had a master plan and that you were against it. It also suggested that you thought too much. When my mother reported that Mr. Tomkey did not believe in television, my father said, “Well, good for him. I don’t know that I believe in it, either.”

“That’s exactly how I feel,” my mother said, and then my parents watched
30 the news, and whatever came on after the news. **B**

Word spread that Mr. Tomkey did not own a television, and you began hearing that while this was all very well and good, it was unfair of him to **inflict** his beliefs upon others, specifically his innocent wife and children. It was speculated that just as the blind man develops a keener sense of hearing, the family must somehow compensate for their loss. “Maybe they read,” my mother’s friend said. “Maybe they listen to the radio, but you can bet your boots they’re doing *something*.”

I wanted to know what this something was, and so I began peering through the Tomkeys’ windows. During the day I’d stand across the street from their
40 house, acting as though I were waiting for someone, and at night, when the view was better and I had less chance of being discovered, I would creep into their yard and hide in the bushes beside their fence.

Because they had no TV, the Tomkeys were forced to talk during dinner. They had no idea how puny their lives were, and so they were not ashamed that a camera would have found them uninteresting. They did not know what attractive was or what dinner was supposed to look like or even what time people were
50 supposed to eat. Sometimes they wouldn’t sit down until eight o’clock, long after everyone else had finished doing the dishes. During the meal, Mr. Tomkey would occasionally pound the table and point at his children with a fork, but the moment he finished, everyone would start laughing. I got the idea that he was imitating someone else, and wondered if he spied on us while we were eating.

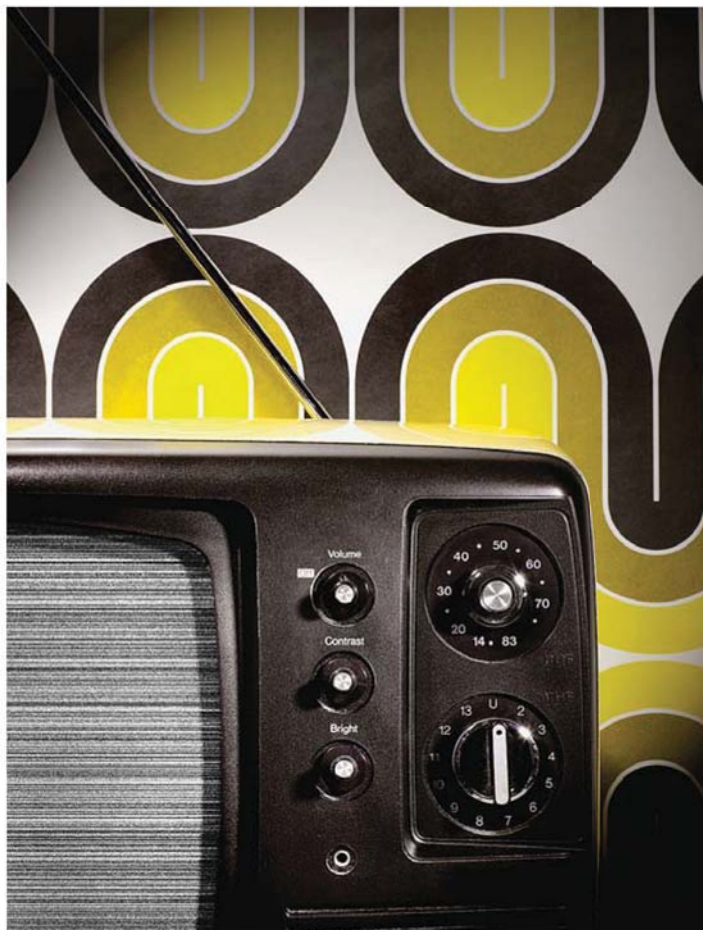
When fall arrived and school began, I saw
60 the Tomkey children marching up the hill with paper sacks in their hands. The son was one grade lower than me, and the daughter was one grade higher. We never spoke, but I’d pass them in the halls from time to time and attempt to view the world through their eyes. What must it be like to be so ignorant and alone? Could a normal person even imagine it? Staring at an

imply (ɪm-ˈplɪ) v. to express indirectly

B IRONY

Reread lines 29–30. What’s the difference between what the mother says and what she does?

inflict (ɪn-ˈflɪkt) v. to deal out something unpleasant or burdensome; to impose



Elmer Fudd⁴ lunch box, I tried to divorce myself from⁵ everything I already knew: Elmer's inability to pronounce the letter *r*, his constant pursuit of an intelligent and considerably more famous rabbit. I tried to think of him as just a drawing, but it was impossible to separate him from his celebrity. **C**

One day in class a boy named William began to write the wrong answer on the blackboard, and our teacher flailed her arms, saying, "Warning, Will. Danger, danger." Her voice was synthetic and void of emotion, and we laughed, knowing that she was imitating the robot in a weekly show about a family who lived in outer space. The Tomkeys, though, would have thought she was having a heart attack. It occurred to me that they needed a guide, someone who could accompany them through the course of an average day and point out all the things they were unable to understand. I could have done it on weekends, but friendship would have taken away their mystery and **interfered** with the good feeling I got from pitying them. So I kept my distance.⁶ **D**

In early October the Tomkeys bought a boat, and everyone seemed greatly relieved, especially my mother's friend, who noted that the motor was definitely secondhand. It was reported that Mr. Tomkey's father-in-law owned a house on the lake and had invited the family to use it whenever they liked. This explained why they were gone all weekend, but it did not make their absences any easier to bear. I felt as if my favorite show had been canceled.

Halloween fell on a Saturday that year, and by the time my mother took us to the store, all the good costumes were gone. My sisters dressed as witches and I went as a hobo. I'd looked forward to going in disguise to the Tomkeys' door, but they were off at the lake, and their house was dark. Before leaving, they had left a coffee can full of gumdrops on the front porch, alongside a sign reading **DON'T BE GREEDY**. In terms of Halloween candy, individual gumdrops were just about as low as you could get. This was evidenced by the large number of them floating in an adjacent dog bowl. It was disgusting to think that this was what a gumdrop might look like in your stomach, and it was insulting to be told not to take too much of something you didn't really want in the first place. "Who do these Tomkeys think they are?" my sister Lisa said.

The night after Halloween, we were sitting around watching TV when the doorbell rang. Visitors were infrequent at our house, so while my father stayed behind, my mother, sisters, and I ran downstairs in a group, opening the door to discover the entire Tomkey family on our front stoop. The parents looked as they always had, but the son and daughter were dressed in costumes—she as a ballerina and he as some kind of a rodent with terry-cloth ears and a tail made from what looked to be an extension cord. It seemed they had spent the previous evening isolated at the lake and had missed the opportunity

C TONE

Reread lines 43–71. What words and images reveal Sedaris's attitude toward the Tomkeys?

interfere (ɪn'tər-fîr') v.
to create an obstacle

D EVALUATE

Do you think Sedaris is right to keep his distance? Explain.

4. **Elmer Fudd** (əl'mər fūd): a cartoon character who is always chasing after Bugs Bunny; Fudd mispronounces the *r* sound as *w*, as in "wascally wabbit."

5. **divorce myself from**: separate myself from.

6. **kept my distance**: kept myself emotionally distant.

to observe⁷ Halloween. “So, well, I guess we’re trick-or-treating *now*, if that’s okay,” Mr. Tomkey said.

110 I **attributed** their behavior to the fact that they didn’t have a TV, but television didn’t teach you everything. Asking for candy on Halloween was called trick-or-treating, but asking for candy on November first was called begging, and it made people uncomfortable. This was one of the things you were supposed to learn simply by being alive, and it angered me that the Tomkeys didn’t understand it. **E**

“Why, of course it’s not too late,” my mother said. “Kids, why don’t you . . . run and get . . . the candy.”

“But the candy is gone,” my sister Gretchen said. “You gave it away last night.”

120 “Not *that* candy,” my mother said. “The other candy. Why don’t you run and go get it?”

“You mean *our* candy?” Lisa said. “The candy that we *earned*?”

This was exactly what our mother was talking about, but she didn’t want to say this in front of the Tomkeys. In order to spare their feelings, she wanted them to believe that we always kept a bucket of candy lying around the house, just waiting for someone to knock on the door and ask for it. “Go on, now,” she said. “Hurry up.”

My room was situated right off the foyer, and if the Tomkeys had looked in that direction, they could have seen my bed and the brown paper bag marked MY CANDY. KEEP OUT. I didn’t want them to know how much I had, and so I
130 went into my room and shut the door behind me. Then I closed the curtains and emptied my bag onto the bed, searching for whatever was the crummiest. All my life chocolate has made me ill. I don’t know if I’m allergic or what, but even the smallest amount leaves me with a blinding headache. Eventually, I learned to stay away from it, but as a child I refused to be left out. The brownies were eaten, and when the pounding began I would blame the grape juice or my mother’s cigarette smoke or the tightness of my glasses—anything but the chocolate. My candy bars were poison but they were brand-name, and so I put them in pile no. 1, which definitely would not go to the Tomkeys.

140 Out in the hallway I could hear my mother straining for something to talk about. “A boat!” she said. “That sounds marvelous. Can you just drive it right into the water?”

“Actually, we have a trailer,” Mr. Tomkey said. “So what we do is back it into the lake.”

“Oh, a trailer. What kind is it?”

“Well, it’s a *boat* trailer,” Mr. Tomkey said.

“Right, but is it wooden or, you know . . . I guess what I’m asking is what *style* trailer do you have?”

150 Behind my mother’s words were two messages. The first and most obvious was “Yes, I am talking about boat trailers, but also I am dying.” The second, meant only for my sisters and me, was “If you do not immediately step forward

attribute (ə-trīb’yōōt)
v. to relate to a certain cause

E EVALUATE

Is Sedaris’s reaction to the late trick-or-treaters appropriate?

7. **observe**: to celebrate.



ANALYZE VISUALS

What's the first thing you notice in this photograph? Now look at the photo more carefully and tell what new **details** you see.

with that candy, you will never again experience freedom, happiness, or the possibility of my warm embrace.”

I knew that it was just a matter of time before she came into my room and started collecting the candy herself, grabbing **indiscriminately**, with no regard to my rating system. Had I been thinking straight, I would have hidden the most valuable items in my dresser drawer, but instead, panicked by the thought of her hand on my doorknob, I tore off the wrappers and began cramming the candy bars into my mouth, desperately, like someone in a contest. Most were miniature, which made them easier to **accommodate**, but still there was only
 160 so much room, and it was hard to chew and fit more in at the same time. The headache began immediately, and I chalked it up to⁸ tension. **F**

My mother told the Tomkeys she needed to check on something, and then she opened the door and stuck her head inside my room. “What . . . are you doing?” she whispered, but my mouth was too full to answer. “I’ll just be a moment,” she called, and as she closed the door behind her and moved toward my bed, I began breaking the wax lips and candy necklaces pulled from pile no. 2. These were the second-best things I had received, and while it hurt to destroy them, it would have hurt even more to give them away. I had just started to mutilate a miniature box of Red Hots when my mother pried them from my hands, accidentally
 170 finishing the job for me. BB-size pellets clattered onto the floor, and as I followed them with my eyes, she snatched up a roll of Necco wafers. **G**

indiscriminately

(ɪnˈdɪ-skɪrɪmˈe-nɪt-lē) *adv.* without making careful distinctions or choices

accommodate

(ə-kŏmˈe-dāt) *v.* to make room for

F IRONY

What actually causes Sedaris’s headache? Tell why this is ironic.

G EVALUATE

What positive or negative qualities is Sedaris displaying?

8. **chalked it up to:** identified its cause or source as.

“Not those,” I pleaded, but rather than words, my mouth expelled chocolate, chewed chocolate, which fell onto the sleeve of her sweater. “Not those. Not those.”



She shook her arm, and the mound of chocolate dropped . . . upon my bedspread. “You should look at yourself,” she said. “I mean, *really* look at yourself.”

Along with the Necco wafers she took several Tootsie Pops and half a dozen caramels wrapped in cellophane. I heard her apologize to the Tomkeys for her
180 absence, and then I heard my candy hitting the bottom of their bags.

“What do you say?” Mrs. Tomkey asked.
And the children answered, “Thank you.”

While I was in trouble for not bringing my candy sooner, my sisters were in more trouble for not bringing theirs at all. We spent the early part of the evening in our rooms, then one by one we eased our way back upstairs, and joined our parents in front of the TV. I was the last to arrive, and took a seat on the floor beside the sofa. The show was a Western, and even if my head had not been throbbing, I doubt I would have had the wherewithal⁹ to follow it. A posse of outlaws crested a rocky hilltop, squinting at a flurry of dust
190 advancing from the horizon, and I thought again of the Tomkeys and of how alone and out of place they had looked in their dopey costumes. “What was up with that kid’s tail?” I asked.

“Shhhh,” my family said.

For months I had protected and watched over these people, but now, with one stupid act, they had turned my pity into something hard and ugly. The shift wasn’t gradual, but immediate, and it **provoked** an uncomfortable feeling of loss. We hadn’t been friends, the Tomkeys and I, but still I had given them the gift of my curiosity. Wondering about the Tomkey family had made me feel generous, but now I would have to shift gears and find pleasure in hating them.
200 The only alternative was to do as my mother had instructed and take a good look at myself. This was an old trick, designed to turn one’s hatred inward, and while I was determined not to fall for it, it was hard to shake the mental picture snapped¹⁰ by her suggestion: here is a boy sitting on a bed, his mouth smeared with chocolate. He’s a human being, but also he’s a pig, surrounded by trash and gorging himself so that others may be denied. Were this the only image in the world, you’d be forced to give it your full attention, but fortunately there were others. This stagecoach, for instance, coming round the bend with a cargo of gold. This shiny new Mustang convertible. This teenage girl, her hair a beautiful mane, sipping Pepsi through a straw, one picture after another, on and on until
210 the news, and whatever came on after the news.  

provoke (prə-vōk’) v.
to cause; to bring up

 **IRONY**

Reread lines 198–210.
Why is it ironic for Sedaris to say he felt generous toward the Tomkeys?

9. **wherewithal** (wâr’wîth-ôl’): ability.

10. **mental picture snapped**: an imagined picture brought quickly to mind, like a snapshot, a quickly taken photograph.

Comprehension

- Recall** Why did the young Sedaris begin spying on the Tomkeys?
- Recall** Why were the Tomkeys unable to trick-or-treat on Halloween?
- Clarify** Why did Mrs. Sedaris want to give her children’s candy to the Tomkey children?

Literary Analysis

- Identify Judgments** The young Sedaris had strong opinions about many things that the Tomkeys did or said. Look through the essay and find at least three places where he makes a positive or negative statement about the family. What do you learn about Sedaris from the judgments he makes? Is his behavior toward the Tomkeys fair? Explain your answer using examples from the selection.
- Analyze Irony** This essay was written by an adult looking back on his childhood. Review the chart you made while reading. Which examples of irony show that Sedaris is making fun of himself and his family? Explain.
- Draw Conclusions** Reread lines 164–168. Why is it so difficult for Sedaris to share his candy with the Tomkeys? What might have happened if he had chosen to share?
- Evaluate Attitudes** Review the passages in which Sedaris mentions television. What are the good and bad things about the role it plays in his and his family’s lives? Note them on a scale like the one shown. Then explain whether you think there’s anything wrong with the way the Sedarises use TV.

<p>3. _____</p> <p>2. _____</p> <p>1. _____</p>	<p>3. _____</p> <p>2. _____</p> <p>1. _____</p>

Extension and Challenge

- Speaking and Listening** David Sedaris has said that he likes to “paint mental pictures” for the people who listen to his essays on the radio. In a small group, take turns reading portions of “Us and Them” out loud. As one person reads, the others should listen for images that particularly stand out to them. Then discuss whether it’s more fun to read the essay or hear it, and why.
- Readers’ Circle** Comedian Joe Ancis once said, “The only **normal** people are the ones you don’t know very well.” Do you think that Sedaris would agree with this quote? Do you agree? Share your conclusions with the class.

Vocabulary in Context

VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Show that you understand the meaning of each boldfaced word by deciding *true* or *false* for each statement.

1. A small car can easily **accommodate** six passengers.
2. Moving away can **provoke** homesickness.
3. Winning a competition does not **merit** congratulations.
4. If someone looks tired, we might **attribute** this to lack of sleep.
5. To **imply** that someone is wrong means to tell that person, “You are wrong.”
6. Work experience and confidence usually **interfere** with a successful job search.
7. Someone who buys shoes **indiscriminately** may not try them on first.
8. If you **inflict** your views on others, you are forcing people to listen to you.

VOCABULARY IN WRITING

How many people have you formed the wrong opinion about? Write a paragraph explaining how your first impression of someone was wrong. Use at least two vocabulary words in your paragraph. You could start this way.

EXAMPLE SENTENCE

The first time I met Richard, I **attributed** his unusual style to his being strange.

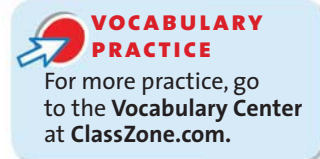
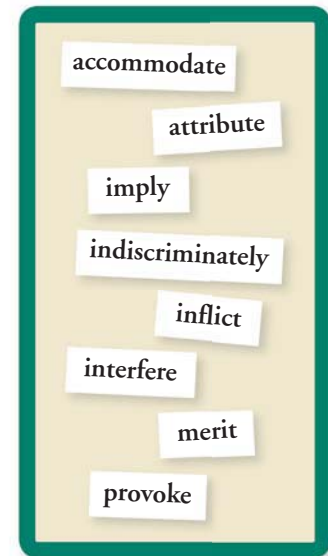
VOCABULARY STRATEGY: IDIOMS

An **idiom** is an expression that has a different meaning from its literal meaning. For example, in this essay Sedaris says that when he got a headache, he “chalked it up to tension.” *Chalked it up to* is an idiomatic expression that means “identified the cause as.” There is no actual chalk or chalkboard involved.

If you encounter an unfamiliar idiom, you can often use context clues to figure out its meaning. Otherwise, look up the first word of the expression in a dictionary, where you will often find idioms explained in the entry.

PRACTICE Identify the idiom in each sentence and give a definition for it.

1. We expected her to be shy, but she'd tell you her life story at the drop of a hat.
2. Josh is definitely up to something—I can tell by the expression on his face.
3. Although I was tired during practice, my coach told me to hang in there.
4. Cynthia was unhappy with the store's service, but her complaints fell on deaf ears.
5. In order to get the exhausted cast through the last hour of rehearsal, the director told them to take five.



Reading-Writing Connection

Continue exploring “Us and Them” by responding to the prompts. Then complete the **Grammar and Writing** exercise.

WRITING PROMPTS	SELF-CHECK
<p>A. Short Response: Write a Journal</p> <p>Sedaris often wondered what life must have been like for the Tomkeys. What did they do since they didn't watch TV? Write a one-paragraph journal entry from the perspective of one of the Tomkey children, describing a normal day in your household.</p>	<p>A creative journal entry will . . .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• describe the members of the Tomkey family• use information from the essay to add details to the narrative
<p>B. Extended Response: Analyze the Message</p> <p>What do you think Sedaris learned from his experience with the Tomkeys? What might he want others to learn? In two or three paragraphs, analyze the message of “Us and Them,” using examples from the selection.</p>	<p>An effective analysis will . . .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• clearly state the message of the essay• refer to specific scenes, lines, and details

GRAMMAR AND WRITING

FORM COMPLEX SENTENCES A **complex sentence** contains one independent clause and one or more dependent clauses. An **independent clause** can stand alone as a sentence. A **dependent clause** is a group of words that contains a subject and a verb but cannot stand alone as a sentence. Dependent clauses begin with words such as *after, because, even though, since, until, where, and who*. By adding one of these words or phrases to an independent clause, you make it dependent. The dependent clause can then be combined with an independent clause to form a complex sentence.

Original: We don't own a television. My family still has fun together.

Revised: Even though we don't own a television, my family still has fun together. (*This is now one complex sentence.*)

PRACTICE In each item, change one independent clause to a dependent clause. Then combine the clauses to form a complex sentence.

1. My family doesn't have a TV. We spend more time talking to each other.
2. We also spend time at the lake house. My brother catches a lot of fish.
3. Sometimes I wish we had a TV. The kids at school make fun of us.
4. We moved to this neighborhood last year. I've made a few friends.

*For more help with dependent clauses and complex sentences, see page R64 in the **Grammar Handbook**.*