Recently in an online forum for editors, someone balked at *then* being used as a coordinating conjunction, as in:

I went to high school, then I went to college.

**Coordinating conjunctions**, you’ll recall, join two items of equal status: two words of the same parts of speech, two phrases of the same type (e.g. adverbial), or two clauses (independent or dependent). *And, or, and but* are coordinating conjunctions.

Look around, though, and you’ll see *then* used as a coordinating conjunction with surprising frequency, even in professionally written and edited copy:

Rub the beets with 1 tablespoon olive oil, then add them to the pan.—*The New York Times*, 2012

I popped the cup into the microwave, set it to nuke anything unfortunate enough to be caught within its grasp for thirty seconds, then raided my fridge for sustenance.—Darynda Jones, *Third Grave Dead Ahead*, 2012

Given that these examples ended up in print, we need to ask why no one noticed the error. Can *then* be used as a coordinating conjunction?

**Defining Then**

*Then* is commonly used as an adverb, adjective, or noun to indicate time:

Will you meet me then?

We contacted the then governor of Arkansas.

We’ll meet again tomorrow; until then, review today’s meeting notes.

*Then* is also used as an adverb to mean "besides," "in that case," and "therefore."

*The American Heritage Dictionary* was the only dictionary I found that addresses the question of *then* as a conjunction:

Sticklers for grammar sometimes assert that *then* is not a coordinating conjunction, and that the sentence *She took a slice of pie, then left* is thus incorrect; it must be rewritten as *She took a slice of pie and then left*, in which the *then* acts as an adverb and the halves of the compound predicate are linked by the coordinating conjunction *and*. But this use of *then* as a coordinating conjunction is actually both widespread and widely accepted; in our 2012 survey, more than three quarters of the Usage Panel found the sentence *She took a slice of pie, then left* completely acceptable.

The dictionary goes on to note that when *then* is used as conjunction, a comma is needed before it, which is different from how conjunctions like *and* function.

In 2012, I wrote about **coordinating conjunctions** and the criteria a word currently needs to meet to be considered one:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Can't occur next to each other</th>
<th>Can't be modified by another word</th>
<th>Joins all constituents</th>
<th>Constituents are commutative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>and</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>but</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Only to specific clause types</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nor</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>so</td>
<td>Can be paired with and, but, or</td>
<td>Can be modified with just</td>
<td>Only to specific clause types</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yet</td>
<td>Can be paired with and, but, or</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Only to specific clause types</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Then* doesn't meet the full criteria of a coordinating conjunction. Like *so* and *yet*, it can be paired with *and, but, and or*:

I walked to the bus stop, but then I decided to take the train.

I will study all day, and then I'll take a nap, or then I'll take a walk.

While *then* can't be modified, it can only join specific types of clauses and the order of the clauses can't be switched, similar to *so* and *for*:

I will bring a notebook, then a pen. ≠ I will bring a notebook and a pen.

I walked to the bus stop, then I decided to take the train. ≠ I decided to take the train, then I walked to the bus stop.

As I noted in my conjunction article, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* identifies *so* as like a conjunctive adverb, like *however*, and *for* as similar to subordinating conjunctions, like *because*. If I had to categorize *then*, I'd say it's more like *because* and *for* because the order of the items is generally important.

**Using *Then***

*Then* doesn't meet the specifications for a coordinating conjunction, but we're using it that way anyway—in professionally published copy, no less. As *AHD* points out, many of us don’t notice or aren't bothered by *then* as a coordinating conjunction in certain conditions.

So can you use it as one?

If the use of *then* complies with the criteria discussed, you'll be in good company using it as a coordinating conjunction. If the usage doesn't meet the criteria or your audience isn't accepting of such a usage, you'd be wise to revise the sentence.

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