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Do This, Then Do That: Coordinating "Then" Usage

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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:

Term	Can't occur next to each other	Can't be modified by another word	Joins all constituents	Constituents are commutative
and	✓	✓	✓	✓
but	✓	✓	✓	✓
for	✓	✓	Only to specific clause types	No
nor	✓	✓	✓	✓
or	✓	✓	✓	✓
so	Can be paired with *and, but, or*	Can be modified with *just*	Only to specific clause types	No
yet	Can be paired with *and, but, or*	✓	Only to specific clause types	✓

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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