

The Simple Sentence

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The **sentence** is a fundamentally human creation. Like the human beings who write them, sentences come in a seemingly endless variety of shapes and sizes: some stretch out for line upon line; others stop short after two or three words. Yet for all its variety, the sentence has a definable structure.

How much do you need to know about this structure to write well? If you can speak and write English, you already know a good deal about the structure of the English sentence. But to make your sentences both grammatically correct and rhetorically effective, you may need to know more about the basic parts.

13.1 THE SUBJECT AND THE PREDICATE

A sentence consists of at least one **clause**—a word group with a subject and a predicate. The **subject** identifies a person, place, or thing. The **predicate** tells what the subject does or is, where it is, what it has, or what is done to it. In statements the subject often comes first:

SUBJECT

Economists

The American economic system

Control of production

Consumers

Prices of goods and services

PREDICATE

study the production and consumption of goods and services.

rewards individual initiative.

is private.

have a variety of choices.

are largely determined by supply and demand.

In this chapter we consider the basic parts of the one-clause sentence (the **simple sentence**) because all other sentences are based on this structure.

13.2 VERBS AND VERB PHRASES

The predicate always includes a **verb**, which may be one word or a phrase:

The comet *is* visible now.

A solar eclipse *will be* visible in October.

Napoleon's victory *revived* his dream of political domination.

Dreams *can revive* old memories.

Over 80 percent of the first inhabitants *perished* in 1607.

All of the early settlers *would have perished* without help from the natives.

Is the ceremony a humane one?

Do the initiation rites *include* bloodletting?

Are interest rates *falling*?

The recession *has not ended* yet.

Every **verb phrase** consists of a base verb and at least one “helping” verb or auxiliary. Auxiliaries include forms of *be* (*is, are, was, were*), *have, has, had, do, does, may, might, can, could, will, shall, would, and should*.

13.3 TYPES OF VERBS

Verbs may be *linking, intransitive, or transitive*.

LINKING VERBS

A **linking verb** connects the subject to a word or phrase that identifies, classifies, or describes it:

John Marshall *was* the fourth chief justice of the United States.

Pyrite *is* a mineral chiefly used as a source of sulfur.

The primaries *are* testing grounds for the candidates of political parties.

Primary campaigns soon *become* expensive.

The most widely used linking verb is a form of *be*, such as *am, is, are, was, or were*. Other linking verbs include *seem, become, feel, sound, and taste*.

The word or phrase that follows a linking verb is called a **subject complement**. If the word is a noun, such as *mineral*, it is called a **predicate noun**. If the word is an adjective, such as *expensive*, it is called a **predicate adjective**.

INTRANSITIVE VERBS

An **intransitive verb** names an action that has no direct impact on anyone or anything named in the predicate:

The Earth *turns* on its axis.

All symptoms of the disease *vanished*.

The volcano *could erupt* at any time.

As the examples show, intransitive verbs do not have objects. Compare them with transitive verbs, shown in the next section.

TRANSITIVE VERBS

A **transitive verb** names an action that directly affects a person or thing mentioned in the predicate. The word or phrase naming this person or thing is called the **direct object (DO)**:

DO

An enthusiastic crowd *greeted* the president at the airport.

DO

Gamblers *lose* money.

DO

A fungus *has been threatening* maples in the region.

Some verbs take an **indirect object (IO)**, which may go before or after the direct object:

IO

DO

The president *gave* his staff a stern warning.

You could also write:

DO

IO

The president *gave* a stern warning to his staff.

Other verbs that give you this option include *make*, *send*, *offer*, *show*, *write*, and *tell*. But whatever the verb, you must put the direct object first whenever both objects are pronouns:

DO IO

Ellen offered it to them.

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Another kind of transitive verb takes an **object complement** (OC), a word or phrase that follows the direct object and classifies or describes it:

DO OC

Many scientists *considered* the experiment a disaster.

DO OC

Unfair accusations *make* most people angry.

DO OC

The jury *found* the defendant guilty of treason.

Other verbs of this kind include *name*, *elect*, *appoint*, *think*, *judge*, and *prove*.

You can use a transitive verb in either the active or the passive voice. When the subject performs the action named by the verb, the verb is **active**:

Farmers *plow* fields.
Vandals *defaced* the queen's portrait.

When the subject undergoes, receives, or suffers the action named by the verb, the verb is **passive**:

Fields *are plowed* by farmers.
The queen's portrait *was defaced* by vandals.

For a full discussion of voice, [see chapter 24](#).

IN BRIEF

Types of Verbs

A **linking verb** connects the subject to a word or phrase that identifies, classifies, or describes it:

Lima *is* the capital of Peru.
Some professional athletes *become* wealthy.

An **intransitive verb** names an action that has no effect on a person or thing mentioned in the predicate:

Children *giggle*.
Palm trees *were swaying* in the moonlight.

A **transitive verb** in the **active voice** names an action performed by the subject and affecting a person or thing mentioned in the predicate:

Winston Churchill *inspired* the people of Great Britain during World War II.
Traffic jams *inhibit* the flow of goods and services.

A **transitive verb** in the **passive voice** names an action affecting the subject. The person or thing performing the action may be mentioned in the predicate after the word *by* or left unmentioned:

During World War II the people of Great Britain *were inspired* by Winston Churchill.

The flow of goods and services *is inhibited* by traffic jams.

Traces of mercury *were found* in the water.

13.4 WRITING THE SUBJECT

The **subject** of a simple sentence can be a noun, a noun phrase, a pronoun, or a verbal noun.

1. A **noun** is a word naming one or more persons, creatures, places, things, activities, conditions, or ideas:

SUBJECT	PREDICATE
Children	thrive on loving care.
Freedom	entails responsibility.
Dinosaurs	became extinct some sixty-five million years ago.

2. A **noun phrase** is a group of words consisting of a main noun (MN) and the words that describe, limit, or qualify it:

SUBJECT (NOUN PHRASE)	PREDICATE
<p style="text-align: center;">MN</p> The price of gold	has dropped sharply.
<p style="text-align: center;">MN</p> Long-standing labor disputes	can be difficult to settle.
<p style="text-align: center;">MN</p> The sound of snoring in the audience	distracted the performers.

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3. A **pronoun** (PR) takes the place of a noun (N):

SUBJECT	PREDICATE
N	
Investors	have become cautious
PR	
They	fear a recession.
N	
Traffic	moved briskly at first.
PR	
It	soon slowed to a crawl.

For a full discussion of pronouns, [see chapter 20](#).

4. A **verbal noun** is a word or phrase formed from a verb and used as a noun. It can function as the subject in a sentence:

SUBJECT	PREDICATE
To err	is human.
Splitting logs	takes muscle.
Verifying the testimony of witnesses to an accident	can be a time-consuming process.

Verbal nouns enable you to treat actions as things, and thus to get more action into your sentences. There are two types: the **gerund**, which ends in *-ing*, and the **infinitive**, which is usually marked by *to*. A verbal noun may also serve

- a. as a predicate noun (PN) after a linking verb:

PN

Their aim is *to obstruct justice*.

PN

The most common mishap of all is *breaking a test tube*.

- b. as the direct object (DO) of a transitive verb:

DO

Gourmands love *to eat*.

DO

Few enjoy *my singing of the national anthem*.

Writing the Subject

IN BRIEF

The subject of a simple sentence may be—

- ▶ a noun:
Children thrive on loving care.
- ▶ a noun phrase:
All the children of the world thrive on loving care.
- ▶ a pronoun:
They need our help.
- ▶ a verbal noun:
To work is to pray.
Seeing is believing.

13.5 PUTTING THE SUBJECT AFTER THE VERB

The subject of a **declarative** sentence—a sentence that makes a statement—usually precedes the verb. But the subject follows the verb in sentences like these:

There were *riots* in the occupied territories.

It is hard to *read small print*.

In these sentences *there* and *it* are introductory words or **expletives**. They are not part of either the subject or the predicate.

The subject also follows the verb when the word order is inverted:

In the center of the painting stands *a white unicorn with a golden horn*.

The inversion of subject-verb order gives special prominence to the subject, so you should use inversion sparingly—and only when you want this special effect.

In most questions the subject (S) follows a verb so that the predicate (P) is divided:

P	S	P
Can	we	find a cure for AIDS?
Have	we	the will and the means?

13.6 OMITTING THE SUBJECT

A sentence that gives a command or makes a request often omits the subject, which is understood to be *you*:

Keep off the grass.

Please don't litter.

Submit your application before June 1.

For more on this type of sentence, which is called **imperative**, see 25.3.

13.7 USING MODIFIERS

The complete subject and the complete predicate of a sentence normally include modifiers. A **modifier** is a word, phrase, or clause that describes, limits, or qualifies another word or word group. The italicized words are all modifiers in this sentence:

SUBJECT	PREDICATE
<i>The price of gold</i>	had dropped <i>sharply</i> .

The words modifying *price* form part of the subject; the word modifying *had dropped* forms part of the predicate. Here are further examples:

S	P
<i>A negligent</i> workman	spilled lye <i>over the oriental rug</i> .

S	P
<i>The equivocal</i> statements of the <i>prime minister</i>	are sending <i>mixed</i> signals <i>to the opposition</i> .

S	P
<i>The brightly painted</i> masks <i>used in the hunting rituals</i>	<i>are sacred</i> objects <i>representing tribal</i> <i>ancestors</i> .

S	P
Grandfather	sat <i>in his rocker, watching the children</i> .

For a full discussion of modifiers, [see chapter 14](#).

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13.8 USING COMPOUND PHRASES

Compound phrases help to turn short, meager sentences into longer, meatier ones. A **compound phrase** joins words or phrases to show one of the following things:

1. ADDITION

Presidential election campaigns have become long.

Presidential election campaigns have become expensive.

COMBINED: Presidential campaigns have become *long and expensive*.

The dancer was lean.

The dancer was acrobatic.

The dancer was bold.

COMBINED: The dancer was *lean, acrobatic, and bold*.

Ants crawled over the floor.

They crawled up the wall.

They crawled onto the counter.

They crawled into the honey pot.

COMBINED: Ants crawled *over the floor, up the wall, onto the counter, and into the honey pot*.

The witness blushed.

He cleared his throat.

He began to speak in a halting manner.

COMBINED: The witness *blushed, cleared his throat, and began to speak in a halting manner*.

2. CONTRAST

Marketing U.S. products in Japan is difficult.

But it is not impossible.

COMBINED: Marketing U.S. products in Japan is *difficult but not impossible*.

3. CHOICE

The government must reduce its spending.

Or it must raise taxes.

COMBINED: The government must *either reduce its spending or raise taxes*.

The senator had not anticipated the setback.

Her staff had not anticipated the setback.

COMBINED: *Neither the senator nor her staff* had anticipated the setback.

For advice on punctuating the items in a compound phrase, [see 29.7–29.8](#).



13.9 EDITING MIXED CONSTRUCTIONS

A **mixed construction** is a combination of word groups that do not fit together grammatically or meaningfully:

MODIFIER MISUSED AS SUBJECT

- *Fearful of the dark

PREDICATE

kept the boy awake all night.

To correct a sentence like this, you can do one of two things:

- Turn the modifier into a noun:

SUBJECT

PREDICATE

EDITED: Fear of the dark / kept the boy awake all night.

- Furnish a noun as the subject:

MODIFIER

SUBJECT

PREDICATE

EDITED: Fearful of the dark, the boy / lay awake all night.

- *The head of the shipbuilding company congratulated the achievement of the workers.

An *achievement* cannot be congratulated; only people can be. To correct the error, change the verb or the object so that the two things fit together:

EDITED: The head of the shipbuilding company congratulated the workers on their achievement.

[or] The head of the shipbuilding company praised the achievement of the workers.

- *Of the two hundred persons questioned, no correct answer was given.

The first part of this sentence leads us to expect that the second part will say something about the *persons questioned*. Since the second part says nothing about them, it leaves us confused:

EDITED: Of the two hundred persons questioned, none answered correctly.



13.10 EDITING FAULTY PREDICATION

Faulty predication using a linking verb between two words that are not equivalent or compatible:

1. *Another kind of flying is a glider.

The sentence classifies an activity (*flying*) as an object (*a glider*). But an activity is not an object. To correct the sentence, make the verb link two activities or two objects:

EDITED: Another type of flying is gliding. (two activities)
[or] Another type of aircraft is a glider. (two objects)

2. *According to the senator, his greatest achievement was when he persuaded the president not to seek reelection.

An achievement is not a time, a *when*. It is an act:

EDITED: According to the senator, his greatest achievement was persuading the president not to seek reelection. (two acts)

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3. *The reason for the evacuation of the building was because a bomb threat had been made.

This sentence equates *reason* with *because*. Those two words are related but not equivalent. *Reason* is a noun, and *because* is not.

EDITED: The reason for the evacuation of the building was that a bomb threat had been made. (noun plus noun equivalent)
[or] The building was evacuated because a bomb threat had been made.

This sentence contains an adverb clause; for more on adverb clauses, [see 17.8](#).



13.11 ADDING THE POSSESSIVE BEFORE A GERUND

Normally a noun or pronoun used before a gerund should be in the possessive case:

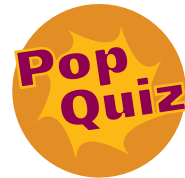
- ▶ Jake^s winning surprised everyone.
- ▶ Everyone was surprised by him^s winning.

The possessive shows that what concerns you is not the person but the action—the winning. When the gerund is followed by a noun, you can use *of* to clarify the meaning:

Jake's winning of the marathon surprised everyone.

Everyone was surprised by his winning of the marathon.

For more on the apostrophe, [see 34.9–34.10](#). For more on the possessive case of pronouns, [see 20.10](#).



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