

UMD ARC/Writing & Reading Center

Parts of a Sentence

I. SUBJECT

The *subject* is what the sentence is about. Also called the naming part of the sentence, the subject answers the question, "Who or what?" when asked in connection with a verb. Usually when the subject is at the beginning of the sentence, it is a noun or pronoun.

- Mary works. [Who or what works? Mary works.]
- Three red apples are on the table. [Who or what is on the table? The apples are on the table.]
- Swimming is a great exercise. [What is great exercise? Swimming.]

A). Simple Subject

The *simple subject* can be the one word that tells what the sentence is about. If there is a simple subject and other words to describe the simple subject, this is called a complete subject.

- The girl works. [(Girl = simple subject.)]
- The pretty, red-haired girl works. [Pretty and red-haired describe girl, so altogether they are a complete subject.]

B). Compound Subject

A *compound subject* is present if a sentence has two or more subjects connected to the same predicate.

- John and Mary went to the movies.

II. PREDICATE

The *predicate* is the verb in the sentence that makes a statement about the subject.

- Mary works.

A) Complete Predicate

A *complete predicate* is the verb or predicate and the words associated with it.

- John rode his bicycle downtown yesterday.

B) Compound Predicate

If one subject in the sentence has more than one predicate, it is called a *compound predicate*.

- John rode his bicycle yesterday and crashed it into an oak tree.

C) Action Verbs

Many predicates are action verbs. An *action verb* indicates either an action of the body or of the mind.

- John ran home.
- John thought about the test.

D) Linking Verbs

Predicates can also be *linking verbs*. A linking verb links the noun, pronoun or adjective that describes or defines the subject of the sentence.

- John is my friend. [**Is** links John, the subject, to the noun following it, **friend**]
- John appears tired. [**Appear** links John, the subject, to the adjective following it, **tired**.]

*Some linking verbs include: **is, am, are, was, were, been, seem, become**, and **appear**. The senses (look, feel, taste, and hear) can either be linking or action verbs, depending on how they are used within the context of the sentence.

- The cake tastes sweet [links description *sweet* to *cake*]
- The chef tastes each cake. [explains chef's actions]

III. DIRECT OBJECT

The *direct object* is a noun or pronoun that answers the question "what or whom?" after an action verb, and often receives the action of the verb.

- John ate the cake. [It answers the question, "John ate what?"]
- Tammy saw her friend. [It answers the question, "Tammy saw whom?"]

IV. INDIRECT OBJECT

An *indirect object* is a noun or pronoun that tells to whom, for whom, to what, or for what something is done. Most often, the indirect object is placed before the direct object.

- Walter bought Doris a watch. It answers the question, "Walter bought a watch for whom?"
- Jay sent his mother flowers. It answers the question, "Jay sent flowers to whom?"

It is possible to substitute a prepositional phrase beginning with for or to for an indirect object:

- Jay sent flowers to his mother.

V. SUBJECT COMPLEMENT

A *subject complement* completes a sentence in which the predicate is a linking verb. Sometimes it may be an adjective describing the subject, in which case the complement is also called a *predicate adjective*.

- Bertha is tall. [*Tall* is both the subject complement and predicate adjective.]

The subject complement may also be a noun that refers back to and “renames” the subject. In this case, the complement is called a predicate nominative.

- Bertha is my sister. [*Sister* is the subject complement that also acts as a *predicate nominative*.]

VI. PHRASES

A *phrase* is a group of related words without a subject and a predicate. It functions as a verb, a noun, an adjective, or an adverb:

A) Verb Phrases

A *verb phrase* is a verb consisting of more than one word.

- Jack has been home for a long time.
- Jarrad should have waited for Becky.

Verb phrases can be made up of helping or auxiliary verbs.

- Mary has been working.
- Sam should have been working.

Some common auxiliaries include: **has, have, had, am, is, are, was, were, be, been, do, does, did, used to, might, must, can, should, could.**

B) Prepositional Phrase

A *prepositional phrase* is a phrase consisting of a preposition (in, on, by, to, since, with) and its *object*, a noun or noun substitute, and any modifiers of the object.

- Alice went home with a friend. Examples of prepositions:

1. Prepositional Phrases Used As Nouns:

Before breakfast is too early. "Before breakfast" is the prepositional phrase used as a noun; it is the subject of the verb "is."

2. Prepositional Phrases Used As Adjectives:

The girl in the red dress is my sister. "In the red dress" is a prepositional phrase used as an adjective; it describes "girl."

3. Prepositional Phrases Used As Adverbs:

Sally went to the movies. "To the movies" is a prepositional phrase used as an adverb; it tells where "Sally" went.

C) Infinitive Phrase

An *infinitive phrase* is introduced by an infinitive. An infinitive is the basic form of the verb from which all other forms are derived. The infinitive is usually combined with the preposition "to," such as: to run, to read, to talk. An infinitive phrase can be used as a noun, an adjective, and an adverb.

1. **Infinitive Phrases Used As Nouns:**

To play backgammon is exciting. ["To play backgammon" is an infinitive phrase; "to play" is the infinitive, "backgammon" is the object of "to play." This infinitive phrase is a noun because it is the subject of the sentence.]

2. **Infinitive Phrases Used As Adjectives:**

I discovered a new way to grow cucumbers. "To grow cucumbers" is an infinitive phrase used as an adjective because it describes the noun "way."

3. **Infinitive Phrases Used As Adverbs:**

Tony swam to get ashore. "To get ashore" is an infinitive phrase used as an adverb because it tells why Tony swam.

D) Gerund Phrase

Gerund phrases are introduced by gerunds. Always used as a noun, a gerund is a word formed by adding -ing to a verb.

- Riding a bicycle is a good exercise. ["Riding" is the gerund, "bicycle" is the object of the gerund and "riding a bicycle" is the gerund phrase because it is used as a noun.]

E) Participial Phrase

Participial phrases, always used as adjectives, are introduced either by present participles or past participles. A present participle is formed by adding -ing to a verb. A *past participle* of the verb form is used after "have," such as: have gone, have reduced, have sold, have worn, have bent

1. **Present Participle:**

- Hearing the crash, John ran outside. ["Hearing the crash" is a participial phrase because it is used as an adjective to describe "John." "Hearing" is a present participle; the "crash" is the object of "hearing."]

2. **Past Participle:**

- Caught in the middle, John tried to escape. ["Caught in the middle" is the participial phrase because it describes "John." "Caught" is the past participle.]

Note: Participles, gerunds, and infinitives are derived from verbs and are therefore called verbals. They are much like verbs because they have different tenses, can take subjects and objects, and can be modified by adverbs. However, they are not verbs because they cannot serve as the core of a sentence. They cannot make a statement, ask a question, or give a command.

VII. CLAUSES

A clause is a group of related words, containing both a subject and a predicate:

A) Main or Independent Clause

A main or independent clause is a clause that can stand by itself as a simple sentence. If there is more than one clause in a sentence, each one of the clauses can act as a main clause, joined to make a sentence.

- Lisa likes to swim, but Wanda prefers to jog.

B) Subordinate, or Dependent Clause

Unlike the main clause, subordinate or dependent clauses are clauses that cannot stand alone. They are used as adverbs, adjectives, or nouns.

- Although Lisa likes to swim, Wanda prefers to jog.

1. Adverb Subordinate Clause

An adverb subordinate clause functions like an adverb. Most often it modifies a verb, adjective, or an adverb. Many times it answers the questions, "when, where, how, why, and under what condition?" Like an adverb, the adverb clause can usually be moved from one position to another in a sentence. An adverb clause begins with a clause signal, or subordinating conjunction, such as **while**, **when**, **as**, **after**, **since**, **where**, **because**, **unless**, **although**, and **if**.

- Because it is raining, we will not walk downtown. [This sentence contains a subject and verb, begins with a subordinating conjunction, cannot stand alone, and tells "why" we will not walk. It can also be moved to the second part of the sentence: "We will not walk downtown because it is raining."]]
- Since Mother started her new job, she no longer picks us up from school.
- Unless you study, you will fail your test.
- My brother and I will get on the bus after we eat breakfast.
- While playing sports, we perspire a tremendous amount of water from our body.

2. Adjective Clause

An adjective clause functions like an adjective: it modifies a noun or pronoun. An adjective clause always follows the word it modifies. Unlike an adverb clause, it cannot be moved to different places in a sentence. Adjective clauses begins with a clause signal, or relative pronoun. The relative pronouns are **who**, **whom**, **whose**, **which**, and **that**.

- My neighbor, who lives across the street, was in a car accident. "Who lives across the street" is the adjective clause: it contains a subject and a verb, cannot stand alone, and describes "neighbor." It begins with the relative pronoun "who," which functions as the subject of the clause. "Who" is used only to refer to people.
- The man, whom I saw running down the street, was not the thief. The adjective clause begins with the relative pronoun "whom," which functions as the direct object of the verb "saw" in the clause.
- He is the student whose book I took by mistake. The adjective clause begins with the relative pronoun "whose," which is the possessive form of "who."

NOTE: That and which can be used to refer either to things or animals.

- The cat that was stuck in the tree was rescued by a firefighter.
- The present that I got from Mary was very useful for school.
- The horse, which had the accident, will not be able to race anymore.

3. Noun Clauses

A noun clause functions like a noun. It can be used as a subject, an object of a verb, an object of a preposition, an indirect object, or a subject complement. The words **that**, **whether**, **what**, **how**, and **why** are often used as clause signals to start noun clauses.

- Whether you are an excellent swimmer is questionable. [It functions as the subject of "is."]

3A. Direct Object Noun Clause

I know that you are coming tonight. [The noun clause is the direct object of the verb “know.”]

3B. Subject Complement Noun Clause

This little gadget is what turns on the television set. [The noun clause complements the subject.]

3C. Indirect Object Noun Clause

He will bake a delicious apple pie for whoever asks for it. [The noun clause is an indirect object of the verb “bake.”]

NOTE: *The underlined word (s) in the example sentences represent the different parts of a sentence defined in the above definition.*

*Compiled by:
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