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Sentences

Subject + Predicate = Sentence

The basic structure of a sentence is a subject and a predicate.

Subject

The subject is the **person or thing that performs the action** of the sentence.

- **Example:** Jackson played me our favorite song.
- **Example:** He will send our friends a copy.
- **Example:** The music he played was beautiful.

Predicate

The predicate often refers to **the action (verb)** of a sentence. However, the **complete predicate** of a sentence contains the action and any modifying information. Basically, it is everything that is not the subject.

- **Example:** Jackson played me our favorite song.
- **Example:** He will send our friends a copy.
- **Example:** The music he played sounded beautiful.

Elements of a Sentence

Once you move beyond the basic structure of a sentence, it can get a little more complicated. The information below will help you understand some of the more difficult elements of a sentence.

Objects

A **direct object** is the person or thing being directly acted on, answering the questions “what?” or “whom?”

An **indirect object** is a person or thing being indirectly acted on, answering the questions “to whom or what?” or “for whom or what?”

- **Example:** Jackson played me our favorite song.
- **Example:** He will send our friends a copy.

Complements

A complement is **an adjective or noun that completes a thought** by modifying/describing or renaming the subject.

- **Example:** The music he played sounded beautiful.
- **Example:** The most amazing part was the chorus.

Articles

Articles modify (provide additional information about) nouns.

- **Indefinite Articles (a/an):** Indefinite articles modify singular, indefinite nouns, representing any one of a type or group of nouns. “A” is used before words that begin with a consonant sound. “An” is used before words that begin with a vowel sound.
 - **Example “A”:** You can hear a violin in the background.
 - **Example “An”:** However, an amazing guitar solo about thirty seconds in is the best part.
- **Definite Article (the):** The definite article modifies specific/particular singular or plural nouns, some noncount nouns, and some geographical nouns.
 - **Example Specific/Plural Noun:** The violin reminds me of when I used to play in college.

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- **Example Noncount Noun:** **The** work it requires to get good is intense.
- **Example Geographical Noun:** The band lives in **the** northeast of **the** United States near **the** Atlantic Ocean.

Conjunctions

Conjunctions **link words, phrases, and clauses together.**

- **Coordinating Conjunctions:** There are seven coordinating conjunctions: **for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so** (fanboys). They connect grammatically equal (parallel) items together (word to word, phrase to phrase, clause to clause).
 - **Example:** I don't know much about the band **or** the song, **but** I found out the song was written about their favorite spot in the mountains **and** tries to emulate the sound of the wind through the trees.
- **Correlative Conjunctions:** These conjunctions come in pairs and are followed by grammatically equal items. These include “**either...or**,” “**both...and**,” “**not only...but also**,” and “**neither...nor**.”
 - **Example:** **Both** Jackson **and** I like to visit the mountains.
- **Subordinating Conjunctions:** These conjunctions connect clauses together but make one clause dependent on the other (see Dependent Clauses below). Example subordinating conjunctions include the following: **although, as soon as, because, even if, in order that, now that, since, that, though, unless, when, where, while**, etc.
 - **Example:** **Whenever** we hear this song, we remember our past vacations.
- **Conjunctive Adverbs:** These conjunctions connect independent clauses together (see Independent Clauses below). Example conjunctive adverbs include the following: **after all, finally, for example, furthermore, however, in addition, likewise, meanwhile, next, on the contrary, otherwise, still, then**, etc. To punctuate a conjunctive adverb, place a semicolon before and a comma after.
 - **Example:** We listen to it at least once a week; **however**, it never gets old.

Modifiers

Modifiers are **words, phrases, and clauses that provide additional information** about another word, phrase, or clause in the sentence. Words that act as modifiers include adjectives (modify nouns) and adverbs (modify verbs, adverbs, and adjectives). Phrases and clauses that act as modifiers also function as adjectives and adverbs. These will be discussed more in the Phrases and Clauses sections.

- **Example Adjective Modifier:** We invited our **wonderful** friends over for a **delicious** dinner.
- **Example Adverb Modifier:** They **happily** agreed to join us.
- **Example Phrase Modifier:** We decided to make **our famous pasta dish**.
- **Example Clause Modifier:** **After buying all the ingredients**, we turned on some music to cook.

Be careful where you place modifiers in the sentence. A **misplaced modifier** is a modifier with ambiguous or illogical placement, making it difficult to determine what word is being modified. A **dangling modifier** is a modifier that does not seem to modify anything in the sentence.

- **Example Misplaced Modifier:** Jackson chatted with me **chopping the salad**. (**Incorrect:** Who is chopping the salad?)
- **Example Correction:** Jackson, **chopping the salad**, chatted with me. (**Correct:** Now it is clear that Jackson was chopping the salad.)

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- **Example Dangling Modifier:** **Completing the pasta sauce**, the noodles needed to be boiled. (**Incorrect:** Who completed the pasta sauce?)
- **Example Correction:** **Completing the pasta sauce**, I needed to boil the noodles. (**Correct:** Now it is clear that I am the subject completing the actions of the sentence.)

Phrases

Phrases are **groups of related words that do not convey a complete meaning on their own.**

- **Noun Phrase:** Acts as a noun
Noun + Modifiers
 - **Example:** **The music playing in the kitchen** echoed down the hallway.
- **Verb Phrase:** Acts as a verb
Main Verb + Auxiliary/Helping Verbs
 - **Example:** The sound **was still reverberating** as the song ended.
- **Prepositional Phrase:** Prepositional phrases at the beginning of a sentence are followed by a comma.
Preposition + Object of the Preposition (noun/pronoun) + Modifiers
 - **Example:** The water **in my tall water glass** rippled from the sound.
- **Adjective Phrase:** Acts as an adjective (modifies a noun) and may be a prepositional phrase
Adjectives + Modifiers
 - **Example:** **The dusty old** record player fell silent.
- **Adverb Phrase:** Acts as an adverb (modifies a verb or adverb) and may be a prepositional phrase
Adverbs + Noun/Preposition/Modifiers
 - **Example:** Jackson **very gently** placed the needle back on the record.
- **Infinitive Phrase:** Acts as a noun, adjective, or adverb
Infinitive (to + verb) + Modifiers
 - **Example:** We wanted **to hear it again**.
- **Gerund Phrase:** Acts as a noun
Gerund (verb + ing) + Modifiers
 - **Example:** We both enjoy **listening to the song quite a bit**.
- **Participle Phrase:** Acts as an adjective and is always set off with commas—
Present-Participle Verb (verb + ing) or Past Participle Verb + Modifiers
 - **Example:** **Dancing around the kitchen to the music**, we began to make dinner.
- **Absolute/Nominative Phrase:** Acts as a sentence modifier and is set off by commas—
Noun/Pronoun + Participle + Modifiers
 - **Example:** We greeted our guests, **smiles lighting our faces**.

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Clauses

Clauses are **groups of related words that include both a subject and a verb**. However, they may not stand as complete sentences on their own.

Independent Clause: *Subject + Verb = Complete Thought*

Independent clauses can stand on their own as complete sentences.

- **Example:** We all listened to the music at dinner.

Dependent/Subordinate Clause: *Incomplete Thought*

Dependent clauses are not complete sentences on their own and must be connected to an independent clause. There are three types of dependent clause: **relative/adjectival clauses**, **noun clauses**, and **adverbial clauses**.

- **Relative/Adjectival Clause:** *Relative Pronoun or Adverb + Subject + Verb = Incomplete Thought*
Relative Pronoun as Subject + Verb = Incomplete Thought

Relative clauses are dependent clauses that function as adjectives and describe the noun that precedes them. Examples of relative pronouns include “**who**,” “**whom**,” “**that**,” “**where**,” “**which**,” etc.

Essential relative clauses, clauses needed to understand the sentence, do not require commas.

Nonessential relative clauses, clauses that provide additional information, should be set off with commas wherever they occur in the sentence.

- **Example Essential Relative Clause:** Mallori is the only one who didn't like the music.
- **Example Nonessential Relative Clause:** Mallori, who didn't like the music, refused to listen to the recording.

- **Noun Clause:** *A clause that functions as a noun*

Noun clauses are dependent clauses. Unlike relative and adverbial clauses, a noun clause is always an essential part of the sentence and it does not act as descriptor.

- **Example:** What Mallori did hurt Jackson's feelings.
- **Example:** He wanted to know why she wouldn't try it.

- **Adverbial Clause:** *Subordinate Conjunction + Subject + Verb = Incomplete Thought*

Adverbial clauses are dependent clauses that function as adverbs, answering the questions where, when, how, how much, how often, and why. Examples of subordinate conjunctions include “**however**,” “**whenever**,” “**since**,” “**because**,” “**when**,” “**if**,” etc. When these clauses occur at the beginning of the sentence, they are followed by a comma. If they come at the end, there is no comma between them and the independent clause.

- **Example:** When the chorus began, he sang along.
- **Example:** He sang along when the chorus began.

Types of Sentences

There are four types of sentences. Simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex.

Simple

A simple sentence contains only **one independent clause**.

- **Example:** My family went to the beach over the summer.
- **Example:** The sound of the crashing waves whispered across the sand.

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Compound

A compound sentence contains **two or more independent clauses** usually connected by a comma and a coordinating conjunction.

- **Example:** My family rented a cabin near the beach, and we brought our bikes to ride into town.
- **Example:** The town held a craft show, but my sister preferred shopping at the souvenir shops.

Complex

A complex sentence contains **one independent clause and at least one dependent clause**.

- **Example:** I walked to the beach because I wanted to avoid the crowds.
- **Example:** When I was in the water, I could feel shells and seaweed on the ocean floor.

Compound-Complex

A compound-complex sentence contains **two or more independent clauses and at least one dependent clause**.

- **Example:** Although some people think feeling things in the water is gross, I was not bothered by it, but I did keep my eyes open for sharks because they scare me.
- **Example:** While we were there, we didn't use the cabin's kitchen since we wanted to take advantage of all the amazing seafood restaurants, but we did use the hot tub.

The Importance of Sentence Variety

Variety is the spice of writing! If all your sentences are short and simple, your writing will feel jerky, child-like, or even aggressive. If all your sentences are three or more lines long, your reader may lose the thread of your idea. However, you can use your knowledge of sentence structure strategically to improve the flow of your writing and create rhetorically interesting rhythms.

Read the following paragraphs aloud and listen to how the flow and feel change when variety is added.

Example 1

Paragraph without Sentence Variety (all simple sentences)

Yesterday, I went to the beach. The sand was coarse. It was very hot. Waves crashed around my feet. It was like they were trying to drag me in. I jumped with excitement. I love that feeling.

Paragraph with Sentence Variety

Yesterday, I went to the beach. The sand was coarse and hot. Waves crashed around my feet, and it felt like they were trying to drag me in; however, I jumped with excitement because I love that feeling.

Example 2

Paragraph without Sentence Variety (all compound-complex sentences)

As I ran up the beach to meet my family, I noticed a seashell sticking out of the sand, and I stooped down to pick it up because it looked like a good candidate for my collection. When I flipped it over to inspect the other side, I jumped as there was a crab still living in it, so I put the shell back where I found it and continued on my way.

Paragraph with Sentence Variety

As I ran up the beach to meet my family, I noticed a seashell sticking out of the sand. I stooped down to pick it up because it looked like a good candidate for my collection. I flipped it over to inspect the other side, and I jumped. There was a crab still living in it. I put the shell back where I found it and continued on my way.