
CHAPTER 1

GRAMMAR

FINDING NOUNS, VERBS, AND SUBJECTS

Definitions

- A **noun** is a word or set of words for a person, place, thing, or idea. A noun of more than one word (*tennis court, gas station*) is called a **compound noun**.

There are **common nouns** and **proper nouns**. Common nouns are words for a general class of people, places, things, and ideas (*man, city, award, honesty*). They are not capitalized. Proper nouns are always capitalized. They name specific people, places, and things (*Joe, Chicago, Academy Award*).

- A **verb** is a word or set of words that shows action (*runs, is going, has been painting*); feeling (*loves, envies*); or state of being (*am, are, is, have been, was, seem*).

NOTE

We will use the standard of underlining subjects once and verbs twice.

Examples: He ran around the block.
I like my friend.
They seem friendly.

State-of-being verbs are called **linking verbs**. They include all forms of the verb *to be* (*be, being, been, am, is, are, was, were*), plus such words as *look, feel, appear, act, go*, followed by an adjective. (See the “Adjectives and Adverbs” section later in this chapter.)

Examples: You look happy.
We feel fine.
He went ballistic.

Verbs often consist of more than one word. For instance, *had been breaking down* is a four-word verb. It has a two-word main verb, *breaking down* (also called a **phrasal verb**), and two **helping verbs** (*had* and *been*). Helping verbs are so named because they help clarify the intended meaning.

Many verbs can function as helping verbs, including *is, shall, must, do, has, can, keep, get, start, help*, etc.

You will sometimes hear the word **participle**, which is the form of a verb used with helping verbs to make verb tenses or is used to form adjectives. For instance, *breaking* and *broken* are the present and past participles, respectively, of the verb *break*. A *broken dish* is an example of a phrase containing a participle as an adjective (see the “Adjectives and Adverbs” section later in this chapter).

Verbs often take **direct objects**, which receive the action of the verb carried out by the subject.

Examples: I like cake. (*cake* receives the action, *like*, done by the subject, *I*)
She lifts weights. (*weights* receives the action, *lifts*, done by the subject, *She*)

Verbs may also take **indirect objects**, which receive the direct object. You can spot an indirect object if it makes sense to place *to* or *from* in front of it.

Examples: I gave Joe the cake. (The indirect object, *Joe*, receives the direct object, *cake*, given by the subject, *I*. Note that you could also say *I gave the cake to Joe*.)
She did me a favor. (The indirect object, *me*, is affected by the direct object, *favor*, done by the subject, *She*. Note that you could also say *She did a favor for me*.)

Sometimes verbs require prepositions to complete a sentence. (See the “Prepositions” section later in this chapter.) A noun affected by a preposition is called simply the **object of a preposition**.

Examples: *Stop talking about them.* (The object of the preposition *about* is *them*.)
I saw someone inside the house. (The object of the preposition *inside* is the house.)

Gerund is another verb-related term we'll mention only briefly. Gerunds are also called verbal nouns, because they are formed when verbs have *-ing* added to them and are used as nouns.

Example: *Walking is great exercise.* (The *-ing* word, the gerund, is the subject of the sentence.)

- A **subject** is the noun, pronoun (see the "Pronouns" section later in this chapter), or set of words that performs the verb.

Examples: *The woman hurried.*
Woman is the subject.
She was late.
She is the subject.
The Shape of Water won an Academy Award.
The Shape of Water is the subject.

Rule 1. To find the subject and verb, always find the verb first. Then ask who or what performed the verb.

Examples: *The jet engine passed inspection.*
Passed is the verb. Who or what passed? The engine, so *engine* is the subject. (If you included the word *jet* as the subject, lightning will not strike you. But technically, *jet* is an adjective here and is part of what is known as the complete subject.)

From the ceiling hung the chandelier.

The verb is *hung*. Now, if you think *ceiling* is the subject, slow down. Ask *who* or *what* hung. The answer is the chandelier, not the ceiling. Therefore, *chandelier* is the subject.

Rule 2. Sentences can have more than one subject and more than one verb.

Examples: *I* *like* *cake*, and *he* *likes* *ice cream*. (Two subjects and two verbs)
He and *I* *like* *cake*. (Two subjects and one verb)
She *lifts* *weights* and *jogs* *daily*. (One subject and two verbs)

Rule 3. If a verb follows *to*, it is called an **infinitive**, and it is not the main verb. You will find the main verb either before or after the infinitive.

Examples: *He is trying to leave.*

To leave is an infinitive; the main verb is *trying*.

To leave was his wish.

The main verb is *was*.

NOTE

One of the most stubborn superstitions in English is that it is wrong to insert a word between the *to* and the verb in an infinitive. This is called a **split infinitive** (*to gladly pay, to not go*). There is no English scholar alive who will say a split infinitive is technically wrong. However, split infinitives tend to be clumsy and unnecessary. Experienced writers do not use them without good reason.

Rule 4. Any request or command, such as *Stop!* or *Walk quickly*, has the understood subject *you*, because if we ask who is to stop or walk quickly, the answer must be “you.”

Example: (*You*) Please bring me some coffee.

Bring is the verb. Who will do the bringing? The subject *you* is understood.

SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

Being able to find the right subject and verb will help you correct errors of subject-verb agreement.

Basic rule. A singular subject (*she, Bill, car*) takes a singular verb (*is, goes, shines*), whereas a plural subject takes a plural verb.

Example: *The list of items is/are on the desk.*

If you know that *list* is the subject, then you will choose *is* for the verb.

Exceptions to the Basic rule:

- a. The first-person pronoun *I* takes a plural verb (*I go, I drive*).
- b. The basic form of the verb is used after certain main verbs such as *watch, see, hear, feel, help, let, and make* (*He watched Ronaldo score the winning goal.*)

Rule 1. A subject will come before a phrase beginning with *of*. This is a key rule for understanding subjects. The word *of* is the culprit in many, perhaps most, subject-verb mistakes.

Hasty writers, speakers, readers, and listeners might miss the all-too-common mistake in the following sentence:

Incorrect: A bouquet of yellow roses lend color and fragrance to the room.

Correct: A bouquet of yellow roses lends. . . (bouquet lends, not roses lend)

Rule 2. Two singular subjects connected by *or*, *either/or*, or *neither/nor* require a singular verb.

Examples: My aunt or my uncle is arriving by train today.

Neither Juan nor Carmen is available.

Either Kiana or Casey is helping today with stage decorations.

Rule 3. The verb in an *or*, *either/or*, or *neither/nor* sentence agrees with the noun or pronoun closest to it.

Examples: Neither the plates nor the serving owl goes on that shelf.

Neither the serving owl nor the plates go on that shelf.

This rule can lead to bumps in the road. For example, if *I* is one of two (or more) subjects, it could lead to this odd sentence:

Awkward: Neither she, my friends, nor I am going to the festival.

If possible, it's best to reword such grammatically correct but awkward sentences.

Better: Neither she, I, nor my friends are going to the festival.

OR

She, my friends, and I are not going to the festival.

See the "Pronouns" section, Rules 11a and 11b for more discussion of subject-verb agreement with pronouns.

Rule 4. As a general rule, use a plural verb with two or more subjects when they are connected by *and*.

Example: A car and a bike are my means of transportation.

But note these exceptions:

Exceptions: *Breaking and entering is against the law.*
The bed and breakfast was charming.

In those sentences, *breaking and entering* and *bed and breakfast* are compound nouns.

NOTE

Some think it is incorrect to place a personal pronoun first in a multi-subject sentence.

Examples: *I, my dad, and my step-mom are going to the movies.*
She and Orville bought a dog.

While not grammatically incorrect per se, it is a courtesy to place the pronoun last, except when awkward to do so as shown under **Rule 3** above.

Rule 5a. Sometimes the subject is separated from the verb by such words as *along with*, *as well as*, *besides*, *not*, etc. These words and phrases are not part of the subject. Ignore them and use a singular verb when the subject is singular.

Examples: *The politician, along with the newsmen, is expected shortly.*
Excitement, as well as nervousness, is the cause of her shaking.

Rule 5b. Parentheses are not part of the subject.

Examples: *Joe (and his trusty mutt) was always welcome.*
 If this seems awkward, try rewriting the sentence.

Rule 6. In sentences beginning with *here* or *there*, the true subject follows the verb.

Examples: *There are four hurdles to jump.*
There is a high hurdle to jump.
Here are the keys.

NOTE

The word *there's*, a contraction of *there is*, leads to bad habits in informal sentences like *There's a lot of people here today*, because it's easier to say "there's" than "there are." Take care never to use *there's* with a plural subject.

Rule 7. Use a singular verb with distances, periods of time, sums of money, etc., when considered as a unit.

Examples: *Three miles is too far to walk.*
Five years is the maximum sentence for that offense.
Ten dollars is a high price to pay.

BUT

Ten dollars (i.e., dollar bills) were scattered on the floor.

Rule 8a. With words that indicate portions—e.g., *a lot*, *a majority*, *percent*, *some*, *all*—Rule 1 given earlier in this section is reversed, and we are guided by the noun after *of*. If the noun after *of* is singular, use a singular verb. If it is plural, use a plural verb.

Examples: *A lot of the pie has disappeared.*
A lot of the pies have disappeared.
Fifty percent of the pie has disappeared.
Fifty percent of the pies have disappeared.
A third of the city is unemployed.
A third of the people are unemployed.
All of the pie is gone.
All of the pies are gone.
Some of the pie is missing.
Some of the pies are missing.

NOTE

Some teachers, editors, and the SAT testing service, perhaps for convenience, have considered *none* to be strictly singular. However, authorities agree that *none* has been both singular and plural since Old English and still is. If in context it seems like a singular to you, use a singular verb; if it seems like a plural, use a plural verb. When *none* is clearly intended to mean “not one,” it is followed by a singular verb.

Rule 8b. With collective nouns such as *group*, *jury*, *family*, *audience*, *population*, the verb might be either singular or plural, depending on the writer’s intent.

Examples: *All of my family has arrived OR have arrived.*
Most of the jury is here OR are here.
A third of the population was not in favor OR were not in favor of the bill.

NOTE

Anyone who uses a plural verb with a collective noun must take care to be accurate—and also consistent. It must not be done carelessly. The following is the sort of flawed sentence one sees and hears a lot these days:

The staff is deciding how they want to vote.

Careful speakers and writers would avoid assigning the singular *is* and the plural *they* to *staff* in the same sentence.

Consistent: *The staff are deciding how they want to vote.*

Rewriting such sentences is recommended whenever possible. The preceding sentence would read even better as:

The staff members are deciding how they want to vote.

Rule 9. The word *were* replaces *was* in sentences that express a wish or are contrary to fact:

Example: *If Joe were here, you'd be sorry.*

Shouldn't *Joe* be followed by *was*, not *were*, given that *Joe* is singular? But *Joe* isn't actually here, so we say *were*, not *was*. The sentence demonstrates the **subjunctive mood**, which is used to express a hypothetical, wishful, imaginary, compulsory, or factually contradictory thought. The subjunctive mood pairs singular subjects with what we usually think of as plural verbs.

Examples: *I wish it were Friday.*
She requested that he raise his hand.
The foreman demanded that Joe wear safety goggles.

In the first example, a wishful statement, not a fact, is being expressed; therefore, *were*, which we usually think of as a plural verb, is used with the singular subject *it*. (Technically, *it* is the singular subject of the object clause in the subjunctive mood: *it were Friday*.)

Normally, *he raise* would sound terrible to us. However, in the second example, where a request is being expressed, the subjunctive mood is correct.

Note: The subjunctive mood is losing ground in spoken English, but should still be used in formal speech and writing.

IRREGULAR VERBS

English verbs are either **regular** or **irregular**. We call a verb regular when we add *ed* (*wanted*, *looked*) or sometimes just *d* (*created*, *loved*) to form what are called the **simple past tense** and the **past participle** (see third and fourth paragraphs below). A regular verb's simple past tense and past participle are always identical.

Not so with irregular verbs. They form the simple past tense and the past participle in any number of unpredictable ways. Some irregular verbs, like *let*, *shut*, and *spread*, never change, whether present or past. Others, like *feel* and *teach*, become modified versions of themselves (*felt*, *taught*) to form both the past tense and the past participle. Still others, like *break* and *sing*, change to form the past tense (*broke*, *sang*) and change again to form the past participle (*broken*, *sung*). And then there are a few really weird ones, like *go*: its past participle (*gone*) is recognizable enough, but its simple past tense is a strange new word (*went*).

Let's get back to the irregular verb *break*. The simple past tense is *broke*, which we use in sentences like *I broke your dish*. We use the past participle, *broken*, to form **compound verbs** in sentences like *I have broken your dish*. The compound verb *have broken* is so called because we've added a **helping verb** (*have*) to the main verb's past participle (*broken*). Be careful never to add a helping verb to the simple past form of an irregular verb—I *have broke* your dish is an embarrassing confession in more ways than one.

The past participle of an irregular verb can also function as an adjective: *a broken dish*. But the simple past form, if it differs from the participle, cannot function as an adjective: *a broke dish* is substandard English.

There are far fewer irregular verbs than regular ones, but we use them all the time. "The ten commonest verbs in English (*be*, *have*, *do*, *say*, *make*, *go*, *take*, *come*, *see*, and *get*) are all irregular," notes Steven Pinker, an American experimental psychologist and linguist, "and about 70% of the time we use a verb, it is an irregular verb." Pinker acknowledges 180 irregular English verbs, but there is an online Extended Irregular Verb Dictionary which contains over 470 irregular verbs, including rare ones such as *bestrew*, *enwind*, and *hagride*.

Proper use of irregular verbs requires old-fashioned memorization—there are no secret formulas or shortcuts. This is why these words can create havoc for conscientious speakers of English.

CLAUSES AND PHRASES

Definitions

- A **clause** is a group of words containing a subject and verb. An **independent clause** is a simple sentence. It can stand on its own.

Examples: *She is hungry.*
I am feeling well today.

- A **dependent clause** cannot stand on its own. It needs an independent clause to complete a sentence. Dependent clauses often begin with such words as *although*, *since*, *if*, *when*, and *because*.

Examples: *Although she is hungry. . .*
Whoever is hungry. . .
Because I am feeling well. . .

Dependent

Although she is hungry,
Whatever they decide,

Independent

she will give him some of her food.
I will agree to.

- A **phrase** is a group of words without a subject-verb component, used as a single part of speech.

Examples: *Best friend* (this phrase acts as a noun)
Needing help (this phrase acts as an adjective; see the “Adjectives and Adverbs” section later in this chapter)
With the blue shirt (this **prepositional phrase** acts as an adjective; see the “Prepositions” section later in this chapter)
For twenty days (this prepositional phrase acts as an adverb)

PRONOUNS

Definition

- A **pronoun** (*I, me, he, she, herself, you, it, that, they, each, few, many, who, whoever, whose, someone, everybody*, etc.) is a word that takes the place of a noun. In the sentence *Joe saw Jill, and he waved at her*, the pronouns *he* and *her* take the place of *Joe* and *Jill*, respectively. There are three types of pronouns: **subject** (for example, *he*); **object** (*him*); or **possessive** (*his*).