

## Sentence Structure

This resource is designed for English Language Learners (ELLs) who require assistance in a particular academic skill. Each handout provides brief explanations related to different core skills (reading, writing, listening, and/or speaking), and it offers some simple examples of mistakes and how these might be corrected.

While these handouts are designed primarily for ELL students, anyone seeking to improve their writing may find these documents useful. Check out the links at the end of the handout for more resources.

### Sentence definition

A **sentence** is a complete thought that has two parts: a subject and a predicate.

<https://arts.uottawa.ca/writingcentre/en/hypergrammar/building-sentences>

### 1. Subject

The **subject** of a sentence names who or what the sentence is about. e.g., *He opened the door*—He is the subject.

<http://guidetogrammar.org/grammar/subjects.htm>

The subject of a sentence is:

- the person or the thing doing the action.
- the person or the thing that is acted upon.

### 2. Predicate

The **predicate** is the part of a sentence which contains a verb and gives information about the subject.

<https://arts.uottawa.ca/writingcentre/en/hypergrammar/the-parts-of-the-sentence>

can describe

- what the subject is doing.
- what the subject is experiencing.
- what is being done to the subject.

## Simple and complete subjects

### Simple subject

A **simple subject** is a word or a group of words that completes the action in a sentence.

<http://www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/writers/subjects/>

### Complete subject

A **complete subject** is the simple subject and its modifiers. A modifier describes the subject and makes it more specific.

<http://www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/writers/subjects/>

### Example

The tall man threw the ball.

The subject is who or what completes the action. The simple subject is “man.” The complete subject is “the tall man.”

The simple subject can also be a group of words.

### Example

What she had taken from the laboratory was so important that she had to tell someone about it.

In this sentence, you want to find what “was so important that she had to tell someone about.” In this case, it is “what she had taken from the laboratory.” This entire group of words is the simple subject.

## Simple and complete predicates

### Simple predicate

A **simple predicate** is a word or a group of words that describes what is happening to the subject.

### Complete predicate

A **complete predicate** is the simple predicate plus its modifiers.  
<http://www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/writers/subjects/>

Consider this sentence:

The student listened carefully.

The simple predicate is “listened” and the complete predicate is “listened carefully.”

## Compound subjects and predicates

### Compound subject

A **compound subject** contains two or more nouns/pronouns and their modifiers.  
<http://www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/writers/subjects/>

The professor and the eager students stayed after class to continue the discussion.  
In this sentence, the compound subject is “The professor and the eager students.”

## Compound predicate

A **compound predicate** contains two or more verbs. It explains two or more things about the subject.  
<http://www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/writers/subjects/>

They walked slowly through the art gallery and admired the powerful sculptures exhibited there.

In this sentence, the compound predicate is “walked” and “admired.”

## Direct and Indirect Objects

### Direct object

A **direct object** is a noun or a pronoun that receives the action of a **transitive verb** and answers a “whom” or “what” question about a verb.  
<https://www.gallaudet.edu/tutorial-and-instructional-programs/english-center/grammar-and-vocabulary/writing-sentences/guide-to-direct-objects>

### Indirect object

An **indirect object** is a noun, a pronoun or a group of words that acts as a noun. It answers the question “to whom” or “for whom” about the verb.  
<http://www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/writers/directobjects/>

### Transitive verb and intransitive verb

A **transitive verb** always has a noun (called the direct object) that receives the action of the verb. An **intransitive verb** never has a direct or an indirect object. Although an intransitive verb may be followed by an adverb or an adverbial phrase, there is not any object receiving the action of the verb.  
<https://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/grammar/verbs>

## Examples

### Transitive verbs with direct objects

The clerk **raised** his eyes from his work.

“Raised” is a transitive verb. “His eyes” is the direct object receiving the verb’s action. (What did he raise? His eyes.)

### Intransitive verbs with no objects

The clerk **rose** from his chair with difficulty.

“Rose” is an intransitive verb. The phrase “from his seat with difficulty” modifies the verb. There is not any direct or indirect object receiving the action “rose.”

The transitive verb sometimes has an indirect object. Please see the examples below.

## Identifying direct and indirect objects

### Examples

Instead of serving my dinner, he showed **me the menu** again.

In the above sentence, “showed” is the transitive verb. The direct object is “the menu” and the indirect object is “me.”

The new instructor gave **the students an exam**.

The simple subject is “instructor.” The verb is “gave.” The direct object is “an exam” and the indirect object is “the students.”

I will help **you**.

In this sentence, the transitive verb is “help” and the direct object is “you.”

## Subject Complements

A **subject complement** is a noun, a pronoun or an adjective that follows a **linking verb**.

<http://www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/writers/complements/>

A **linking verb** says something about a subject’s existence (*be, seem, remain*), or something that can be sensed (*hear, feel, smell*). It identifies or describes the subject.

<https://arts.uottawa.ca/writingcentre/en/hypergrammar/using-verbs>

## Example

The professor is a genius.

In this sentence, the subject is “the professor.” The linking verb is “is” and the subject complement is “a genius.”

## Modifiers

A **modifier** is a word or a group of words that describes or limits other words. A modifier can be in the subject or the predicate.

<https://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/grammar/modifiers>

## Examples

The **old red** car was stolen.

“Old” and “red” modify “car”.

The police **reluctantly** searched for the **stolen** car.

“Reluctantly” describes how the police searched. “Stolen” specifies which car the police looked for.

The owner **of the car** was **very angry**.

“Of the car” specifies the owner. “Very angry” describes the owner.

## Appositives

An **appositive** is a noun or a group of nouns that renames the noun or the pronoun that comes before it.

[https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general\\_writing/grammar/appositives.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/grammar/appositives.html)

## Examples

The movie, *The King’s Speech*, won many awards.

“The King’s Speech” is the appositive for “the movie.”

The lecturer, Dr. Ali, is teaching the class.

“Dr. Ali” is the appositive for “the lecturer.”

Midori enrolled in ECO300, a course for intermediate economics students, at the University of Toronto Mississauga in 2019, and found that it expanded concepts from many of her earlier classes.

“A course for intermediate economics students” is the appositive for “ECO100.”

## Clauses

A **clause** is a group of words that has a subject and a predicate. There are two kinds of clauses: **independent clause** and **dependent clause**.

<https://arts.uottawa.ca/writingcentre/en/hypergrammar/building-clauses>

## Independent clauses

An **independent clause** is a group of words that contains a subject and a verb and expresses a complete thought. An independent clause can stand alone as a sentence. In other words, it does not need any additional information to operate as a sentence. The sentence "He does not travel" is an example of an independent clause.

<https://www.nmu.edu/writingcenter/independentdependent-clauses>

## Dependent clauses

A **dependent clause** is a group of words that contains a subject and a verb but does not express a complete thought. For example, "**because** he does not travel" is not a complete sentence. Often a dependent clause is marked by a **subordinating conjunction** such as the marker “because” in the above example.

<https://www.nmu.edu/writingcenter/independentdependent-clauses>

There are two kinds of dependent clauses.

## Two types of dependent clauses

### 1. Adverb clause

An **adverb clause** starts with a subordinating conjunction. This connects a dependent clause to an independent clause, such as *although, because, when*. The adverb clause answers a question about the independent clause, such as *how, why, when, under what circumstances*.

<http://www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/writers/nounclauses/>

#### Examples

**Although it is raining**, I will bike to school.

“Although it is raining” is the adverb clause because it starts with the subordinating conjunction “although.” It answers the question: why will I bike to school?

The police caught the criminal **because he left his fingerprints at the crime scene**.

“Because he left his fingerprints at the crime scene” is the adverb clause as it begins with the subordinating conjunction “because” and answers the question: how did the police catch the criminal?

### 2. Adjective clause

An **adjective clause** is a dependent clause. It starts with a relative pronoun (*which, that, who, whom, whose*) or a relative adverb (*when, where*) and modifies the noun or the pronoun that it follows.

<http://www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/writers/nounclauses/>

#### Examples

The car **that the thief took** is red.

“That the thief took” is the adjective clause that modifies the car. Notice that if “that the thief took” is removed from the sentence, you are left with just the independent clause “The car is red.”

The day **when the team wins a game** will arrive soon.

“When the team wins a game” is the adjective clause. It specifies “the day” that “will arrive soon.”

## Four types of sentence structure

### 1. Simple sentence

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

<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/sentence-patterns/>

#### Example

Canada is a rich country.

There is only one independent clause in this sentence.

### 2. Compound sentence

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

<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/sentence-patterns/>

#### Example

Canada is a rich country, but it still has many poor people.

“Canada is a rich country” and “it still has many poor people” are independent clauses connected by the comma and the coordinating conjunction “but.”

### 3. Complex sentence

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

<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/sentence-patterns/>

#### Example

Although Canada is a rich country, it still has many poor people.

“Although Canada is a rich country” is a dependent clause; “it still has many poor people” is an independent clause.

## 4. Compound-complex sentence

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

<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/sentence-patterns/>

### Example

When Canada eliminates homelessness, it will be a rich country, and it will provide a decent quality of life for all its citizens.

“When Canada eliminates homelessness” is a dependent clause; “it will be a rich country” and “it will provide a decent quality of life for all its citizens” are two independent clauses.

### Practice Exercises:

1. Identify the complete subject:

After the movie, the young woman bought a birthday present for her mother.

- A. the young woman
- B. present
- C. movie
- D. woman
- E. mother

2. Identify the compound subject:

Henry and his friends like reading novels.

- A. Henry
- B. his friends
- C. novels
- D. Henry and his friends

3. Identify the simple predicate:

I went to the concert in the arts centre last month.

- A. concert
- B. arts centre
- C. went
- D. last month

4. Identify the complete predicate:

Hemingway's prize-winning works truly reflected preoccupation with life and death.

- A. works
- B. preoccupation
- C. life and death

- D. reflected
- E. truly reflected

5. Identify the compound predicate:

Yesterday at the gym I ran 2 miles on the treadmill, swam 1.5 miles in the pool, and joined a spin class in the studio.

- A. ran, swam, joined
- B. in
- C. class
- D. ran
- E. swam

6. Identify the simple predicate:

From the age of seven, Citra played competitive baseball with her best friend Turner.

- A. baseball
- B. age of seven
- C. played
- D. with his best friend

7. Identify the direct object:

The soccer player changed his clothes.

- A. soccer player
- B. his clothes
- C. his
- D. changed

8. Identify the direct object:

The banker's wife often wears fancy shoes.

- A. executive
- B. Porsche
- C. work
- D. fancy shoes

9. Identify the indirect object:

Her secret admirer gave her a bouquet of flowers.

- A. bouquet of flowers
- B. flowers
- C. admirer
- D. her

10. Identify the simple subject:

Several paintings by Picasso rank among the most expensive paintings in the world.

- A. several
- B. Picasso
- C. paintings
- D. world

## Answers to Practice Exercises:

1. A) the young woman
2. D) Henry and his friends
3. C) went
4. E) truly reflected
5. A) ran, swam, joined
6. C) played
7. B) his clothes
8. D) fancy shoes
9. D) her
10. C) paintings

### More resources for sentence structure and grammar

Grammar: Sentence structure and types of sentences – Walden University

<https://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/grammar/sentencestructure>

Sentence structure – Towson University

<https://webapps.towson.edu/ows/sentence.asp>

Develop your academic language, improve your academic skills, and get a Co-Curricular Record notation. Attend the Professional English Language Skills (PELS) workshops:

<https://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/professional-english-language-skills-pels>

Get feedback on your writing and discuss your thought process. Book an appointment with an instructor: <http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/appointments-undergraduate>.

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