

Sentence Analysis Essentials

We know that English grammar is a difficult subject to teach and understand, but knowledge of grammar helps writers understand how to correct common errors at the sentence and paragraph levels. The material and exercises below are for you to use if you struggle with errors such as subject-verb agreement, noun-pronoun agreement, incorrect verb tense and voice, run-on sentences and sentence fragments. Although this was designed for high school students, it can be adapted easily to university students.

STEP ONE

Find the verb

Verbs: A Definition That Works

A common definition of a verb is “a word that shows action or a state of being.” However, this definition does not provide most people with a reliable way to find the verb of a sentence. First, no one really understands what “state of being” means, and second, “action” does not always indicate a verb:

Example: Running is good exercise.

When asked, students will often pick out *running* or *exercise* as action words, but neither of those serves as the verb in this sentence.

Joseph C. Blumenthal, a college composition professor, devised a method for identifying verbs in a sentence that takes advantage of a unique quality of verbs: Verbs are the only words in the English language that change when the tense of the sentence changes. Thus, he devised the following approach:

TO FIND THE VERB OF A SENTENCE:

1. Change the tense of the sentence.
2. Any word that changes is a verb. (Appearing and disappearing count as changes.)

Examples:

Running is good exercise.

Running was good exercise.

Running will be good exercise.

Ryan washes his car and then goes for a run.

Ryan washed his car and then went for a run.

Ryan will wash his car and then go for a run.

Note: You must change the tense of the entire sentence; changing the tense of isolated words will not work.

Example: Samirah went for a run around the block.

(By itself, the word *run* can be changed to *ran*, *have/has run* and *will run*, but those changes will not fit in the context of the entire sentence. Therefore, *run* is not the verb.

To understand verbs, some students may need a review of tense (tense = time), the three simple tenses (present, past and future), irregular verbs, and/or contractions. You can find information about verbs in any grammar handbook or online through Grammar Girl.

STEP TWO

Subjects

To find the subject (simple predicate) of a sentence:

1. Find the word that you can change to reflect present, past or future time and
2. Ask the question, "Who or what _____?" (... is doing the spotting.)
3. Underline the subject once.
Example: Susan spotted a sandhill crane in the farmer's field.

PRACTICE EXERCISE: FINDING SUBJECTS AND VERBS

Use the above method to find the verb and the subject of each sentence below.

- a. Underline each verb twice.
- b. Underline each subject once.

Example: Adam stumbled over the skateboard on the stairs.

1. The girls rode their bikes to the lake.
2. Ali never smiles at me.
3. My father asked me to go to a Raptors' game with him.
4. Syd took the shot and made the goal.
5. Dakota always phones on Saturday morning.
6. His well-developed biceps may have helped his performance at the track meet.
7. Before a major test Jolene usually studies by writing out her notes.
8. Sam and Koko sent me a ticket to fly to Vancouver.

STEP THREE

Prepositions and Prepositional Phrases

One common sentence error writers make is that the subject and verb do not agree in number; that is, the subject is singular, but the verb is in the plural form and vice versa.

If the subject is plural, the verb must be plural: The cars need gas to run.

If the subject is singular, the verb must be singular: The car needs gas to run.

Having subjects and their verbs agree becomes more complicated when a prepositional phrase comes between the subject and verb;

e.g., The doors (of the car) need/needs paint. Which verb is correct?

To answer this question, we need to understand prepositional phrases.

- A prepositional phrase is a group of words that starts with a preposition and ends with a noun or pronoun that is called the object of the preposition.
- Below is a list of words that can be prepositions:

about	by	past
above	concerning	through
after	down	throughout
against	during	to
along	except	toward
among	for	under
around	from	underneath
at	in	until
before	into	up
behind	like	upon
below	near	via
beneath	of	with
beside	off	within
between	on	without
beyond	over	

- A preposition never appears alone; it is the first word of a phrase that starts with a preposition and ends with a noun or pronoun.
- A prepositional phrase can be short or long:

I found my backpack (in the school).

I found my backpack (in the old school).

I found my backpack (in the old brick school).

I found my backpack (in the old brick elementary school).

I found my backpack (in the old red and yellow brick elementary school).

- Note that the **prepositional phrase always starts with a preposition and ends with a noun or pronoun** (called the object of the preposition).

RULE #1: The verb of a sentence agrees with the subject, not the object of the preposition.

RULE #2: The subject of a sentence is never in a prepositional phrase.

TIP: When you are looking for the subject of a sentence, cross the prepositional phrase out because the subject will never be in the prepositional phrase:

The doors (of the car) need/needs paint.

Now we can see that the verb of the sentence is *need* because the subject is *doors* (not car).

PRACTICE EXERCISE:

Finding Verbs, Prepositional Phrases and Subjects

In the sentences below:

- a. double underline each verb
- b. put round brackets () around each prepositional phrase and temporarily “cross it out in your mind” because the subject will never be inside the prepositional phrase
- c. underline the subject once

Example:

A clump (of ferns) borders the path.

1. Only one of the professional engineers is eligible for the job.
2. Each of the engineers works twelve hours a day.
3. The front window in all the houses requires adjustment.
4. The marble steps in the hall lead to the ballroom.
5. Both sides of the garden need weeding.

(See Teresa Glazier’s text for a plethora of examples!)

STEP FOUR

The Independent Clause (aka “main idea” or “complete thought”)

Definitions:

Clause: A group of words that contains a subject and a verb (and all the words that modify the subject and verb).

There are two kinds of clauses. We'll start with the independent clause:

An independent clause

- a. has a verb
- b. has a subject
- c. makes sense by itself (can stand alone as a sentence)

Example: (After the race,) Alice gobbled her hamburger.

We underline a verb twice and a subject once. How should we denote the third characteristic of an independent clause – that it “makes sense by itself”? How about a wavy line, like a snake, under the whole independent clause

RULE #1: Every complete sentence must contain at least one independent clause, i.e., one snake.

Example: After the race, Alice gobbled her hamburger

A special warning about -ing words!!

RULE #2: An -ing word by itself cannot serve as the verb of a sentence.

Example: the student sleeping in the back row

Although *sleeping* might be changed to *sleep* or *will sleep*, by itself, *sleeping* cannot be the verb of a sentence.

PRACTICE EXERCISE: IDENTIFYING INDEPENDENT CLAUSES

In the word groups below

- a. Underline each verb twice
- b. Put round brackets around each (prepositional phrase)
- c. Underline each subject once
- d. Put a “snake” under each independent clause.

1. the exhausted driver dozed in the van of his truck
2. when the play finally started
3. a Canadian flag billowing at the stern of the ship
4. Ade laughed
5. because he scored five goals in the last period
6. the empty house with smoke streaming from the windows
7. since she decided to go to school in British Columbia
8. singing softly, Anna left the stage.

Now add a capital letter and a period to the independent clauses you have identified.

STEP FIVE

The Subordinate Clause: A Discovery Method

1. Using the previous practice exercise, Identifying Independent Clauses, find word groups that contain a subject and a verb, but which do not qualify as independent clauses. What prevents these word groups from being independent clauses? The words *when*, *because*, and *since* are the focus.

2. What should we call these words to indicate their effect? One class came up with the name “sense destroyers,” and let’s go with that. Cover the list below and generate as many “sense destroyers” as you can. If you start running out of ideas, use a test sentence such as *Joe broke his leg*. Keep going till you make your own list of sense destroyers, as in: “Even though Joe broke his leg ...”

SENSE DESTROYERS

after	even as	than	whereby
although	even if	that*	where/wherever
as	even though	though	which*/whichever*
as if	how	unless	while
as though	if	until	who*/whoever*
as soon as	since	what/whatever	whom*/whomever*
because	so that	when/whenever	whose*
before		whereas	why

3. The words that are “sense destroyers” are actually called subordinate conjunctions.

So far, we know about one kind of clause, the independent clause. It can stand alone as a sentence, but when you add a “sense destroyer” subordinate conjunction, it makes the clause subordinate (aka dependent). All subordinate clauses must have at least one independent clause to give the sentence grammatical integrity.

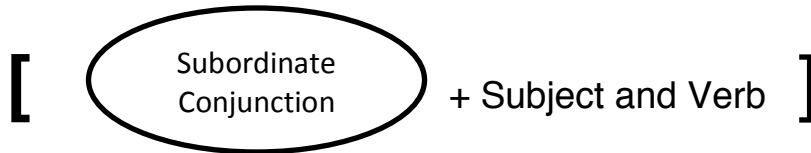
How are subordinate and independent clauses alike?

- they both have a complete verb
- they both have a subject

However ...

- A subordinate clause cannot be a sentence by itself – it needs an independent clause to carry grammatical meaning.

When doing sentence analysis, enclose all clauses in square brackets. You can encase the subordinate clause within square brackets, circle the subordinate conjunctions and indicate the subject and verb as you would in an independent clause. A standard way to diagram a subordinate clause follows:



Subordinate Clause Structure.

This diagram is also referred to as a *visual clausal analysis*.

Let's return to the practice exercise.

- a. Underline each verb twice
- b. Put round brackets () around each prepositional phrase
- c. Underline each subject once
- d. Circle each subordinate conjunction
- e. Put square brackets [] around each subordinate clause
- f. Put a "snake" under each independent clause.

PRACTICE EXERCISE: ANALYZING INDEPENDENT AND SUBORDINATE CLAUSES

1. the exhausted driver dozed in the van of his truck
2. when the play finally started
3. a Canadian flag billowing at the stern of the ship
4. Ade laughed
5. because he scored five goals in the last period
6. the empty house with smoke streaming from the windows
7. since she decided to go to school in British Columbia
8. singing softly, Anna left the stage.

PRACTICE EXERCISE: RECOGNIZING INDEPENDENT AND SUBORDINATE CLAUSES

Do a visual clausal analysis of each sentence below. In other words,

- a. Underline each verb twice;
- b. Put round brackets () around each prepositional phrase;
- c. Underline each subject once;
- d. Circle each subordinate conjunction;
- e. Put square brackets [] around each subordinate clause;
- f. Put a “snake” under each independent clause.

1. I will go if Jamar picks me up.
2. Although Frances entered the contest every year, she has never won a prize.
3. We heard the taxi’s horn from our apartment on the twelfth floor.
4. She will answer after the buzzer rings.
5. The watch that I got for my birthday is broken already.
6. The tallest member of the family cleans the top of the refrigerator.
7. The baseball that Andrew threw over the backstop was never seen again.
8. The writer of the story the judges find most entertaining will win \$1000.