**English Grammar 101: All You Need to Know**

**Sentences**

Sentences are made of two parts: the **subject** and the **predicate**.

The subject is the person or thing that acts or is described in the sentence. The predicate, on the other hand, is that action or description.

Complete sentences need **both** the subject and the predicate.

**Clauses**

Sentences can be broken down into clauses.

For example: *The boy is going to the school, and he is going to eat there.*

This is a complete sentence composed of two clauses. There are mainly two types of clauses: independent clauses and subordinate clauses.

**Independent** clauses act as complete sentences, while **subordinate** clauses cannot stand alone and need another clause to complete their meaning. For example:

Independent clause example: *The boy went to the school.*  
Subordinate clause example: *After the boy went to the school…*

**Phrases**

A group of two or more grammatically linked words that **do not** have subject and predicate is a phrase.

Example of a complete sentence: *The girl is at home, and tomorrow she is going to the amusement park.*  
Example of a clause: *The girl is at home*  
Example of a phrase: *The girl*

You can see that “the girl” is a phrase located in the first clause of the complete sentence above.

Phrases act like parts of speech inside clauses. That is, they can act as nouns, adjectives, adverbs and so on.

**Parts of Speech**

A word is a “part of speech” only when it is used in a sentence. The function the word serves in a sentence is what makes it whatever part of speech it is.

For example, the word “run” can be used as more than one part of speech:.

*Sammy hit a home run.*

*Run* is a noun, direct object of *hit*.

*You mustn’t run near the swimming pool.*

*Run* is a verb, part of the verb phrase *must (not) run*.

Traditional grammar classifies words based on eight parts of speech: the **noun**, the **pronoun**, the **adjective**, the **verb**, the **adverb**, the **preposition**, the **conjunction**, and the **interjection**. We are going to cover them individually below.

**Nouns**

A **noun** is a word used to describe a person, place, thing, event, idea, and so on. Nouns represent one of the main elements of sentences, along with verbs, adjectives, prepositions and articles.

Nouns usually function as **subjects** or **objects** within sentences, although they can also act as adjectives and adverbs.

Here is a list with the different types of nouns:

1. **Proper nouns**

Used to describe a unique person or thing, proper nouns always start with a capital letter. Examples include *Mary*, *India*, and *Manchester United*.

2. **Common nouns**

Common nouns are used to describe persons or things in general. Examples include *girl*, *country*, and *team*

3. **Concrete nouns**

Nouns that can be perceived through the five senses are called concrete nouns. Examples include *ball*, *rainbow* and *melody*.

4. **Abstract nouns**

Nouns that cannot be perceived through the five senses are called abstract nouns. Examples include *love*, *courage*, and *childhood*.

5. **Countable nouns**  
Countable nouns can be counted. They also have both a singular and a plural form. Examples include *toys*, *children* and *books*.

6. **Non-countable nouns**

These nouns (usually) can not be counted, and they don’t have a plural form. Examples include *sympathy*, *laughter* and *oxygen*.

7. **Collective nouns**

Collective nouns are used to describe groups of things. Examples include *flock,* *committee* and *murder*.

**Plural Form of Nouns**

The English language has both **regular** and **irregular** plural forms of nouns. The most common case is when you need to add -s to the noun. For example *one car* and *two cars*.

The other two cases of the regular plural form are:

1. nouns that end with **s, x, ch** or **sh**, where you add **-es** (e.g., one box, two boxes)
2. nouns that end with **consonant + y**, where you change the **y with i and add -es** (e.g., one enemy, two enemies)

On the irregular plural form of nouns there are basically eight cases:

1. nouns that end with **-o**, where you add **-es** (e.g., one potato, two potatoes)
2. nouns ending with **-is**, where you change **-is to -es** (e.g., one crisis, two crises)
3. nouns ending with **-f**, where you change -**f to -v and add -es** (e.g., one wolf, two wolves)
4. nouns ending with **-fe**, where you change **-f to -v and add -s** (e.g., one life, two lives)
5. nouns ending with **-us**, where you change **-us to -i** (e.g., one fungus, two fungi)
6. nouns that contain **-oo**, change **-oo to -ee** (e.g., one foot, two feet)
7. nouns that end with **-on**, where you change **-on with -a** (e.g., phenomenon, phenomena)
8. nouns that don’t change (e.g., sheep, offspring, series)

It might appear overwhelming, but after using these nouns a couple of times you will be able to memorize their plural form easily.

**Pronouns**

**Pronouns** are used to **replace nouns** within sentences, making them less repetitive and mechanic. For example, saying “*Mary didn’t go to school because Mary was sick*” doesn’t sound very good. Instead, if you say “*Mary didn’t go to school because she was sick*” it will make the sentence flow better.

There are several types of pronouns, below you will find the most common ones:

1. **Subjective personal pronouns.** As the name implies, subjective pronouns act as subjects within sentences. They are: *I, you, he, she, we, they*, and *it*.

Example: *I am going to the bank while he is going to the market.*

2. **Objective personal pronouns**. These pronouns act as the object of verbs within sentences. They are: *me, you, him, her, us, them* and *it*.

Example: *The ball was going to hit me in the face.*

3. **Possessive personal pronouns**. These pronouns are used to indicate possession, and they are placed after the object in question (as opposed to possessive adjectives like *my* and *your*, which are placed before the object). They are: *mine, yours, his, hers, ours, theirs* and *its*.

Example of possessive adjective: *This is my car.*  
Example of possessive pronoun: *This car is mine.*

4. **Reflexive pronouns**. This special class of pronouns is used when the object is the same as the subject on the sentence. They are *myself, yourself, himself, herself, ourselves, themselves* and *itself*.

Example: *I managed to cut myself in the kitchen.*

5. **Interrogative pronouns**. As you probably guessed these pronouns are used to ask questions. They are *what, which, who, whom* and *whose*.

Example: *What are the odds?*

6. **Demonstrative pronouns**. These pronouns are used to indicate a noun and distinguish it from other entities. Notice that demonstrative pronouns replace the noun (while demonstrative determiners modify them). They are: this, that, these, those.

Example of a demonstrative determiner: *This house is ugly.*  
Example of a demonstrative pronoun: *This is the right one.*

7. **Indefinite pronouns**. As the name implies, indefinite pronouns do not refer to a specific thing, place or person. There are many of them, including *anyone, anywhere, everyone, none, someone* and so on.

Example: *Everyone is going to the party.*

**Adjectives**

An adjective is a word that describes a noun. There are two kinds: **attributive** and **predicative**.

An adjective is used **attributively** when it stands next to a noun and describes it.

For example: *The* ***black*** *cat climbed a tree.*

Notice that the verb participle forms can be used as adjectives:

*The man felt a* ***paralyzing*** *fear.*  
***Flavored*** *oatmeal tastes better than plain oatmeal.*

The usual place of the adjective in English is in front of the noun. You can have a whole string of adjectives if you like: *The* ***tall thin evil-looking*** *cowboy roped the* ***short, fat, inoffensive*** *calf.*

Sometimes, for rhetorical or poetic effect, the adjective can come after the noun:  
*Sarah* ***Plain*** *and* ***Tall*** (book title)  
*This is the forest* ***primeval****.*

An adjective is used **predicatively** when a verb separates it from the noun or pronoun it describes:  
*The umpire was* ***wrong****.  
The crowd was* ***furious****.  
She seems* ***tired*** *today.  
This soup tastes* ***bad****.  
The dog’s coat feels* ***smooth****.*

The verbs that can be completed by **predicate adjective**s are called **being verbs** or **copulative verbs**. They include all the forms of *to be* and sensing verbs like *seem, feel*, and *taste*.

**Adjective Classifications**

* **qualitative**: *good, bad, happy, blue, French*
* **possessive**: *my, thy, his, her, its, our, your, their*
* **relative and interrogative**: *which, what, whatever*, etc.
* **numeral**: *one, two, second, single*, etc.
* **indefinite**: *some, any, much, few, every*, etc.
* **demonstrative**: *this, that, the, a (an), such*

The demonstrative adjectives **the** and **a** (**an**) are so important in English that they have a special name: **articles**. They are discussed separately below.

**Articles**

The words **a**, **an**, and **the** are generally called **articles** and sometimes classed as a separate part of speech. In function, however, they can be grouped with the demonstrative adjectives that are used to point things out rather than describe them.

**Definite Article**  
**The** is called the definite **article** because it points out a particular object or class.  
*This is the book I was talking about.*  
*The dodo bird is extinct.*

**Indefinite Article**  
**A** is called the **indefinite article** because it points out an object, but not any particular specimen.  
*a book, a dog, a lawn mower*

The indefinite article has two forms:  
**A** is used before words beginning with a consonant sound or an aspirated *h*:  
*a car, a lamb, a hope, a habit, a hotel*

**An** is used before words beginning with a vowel sound:  
*an ape, an image, an untruth, an honorable man*

**Verbs**

English has three kinds of Verbs: transitive, intransitive, and incomplete.

**1. Transitive Verbs**  
A verb is **transitive** when the action is carried **across** to a receiver:

*The farmer grows potatoes. Elvis sang ballads.*

The receiver is called the direct object. It answers the question “What?” or “Whom? after the verb. Grows what? *Potatoes*. Sang what? *Ballads*.

**2. Intransitive Verbs**  
A verb is **intransitive** when the action stays with the verb. It is not carried across to a receiver:

*Corn grows. Elvis sang.*  
Adding a prepositional phrase to modify the verb does not change the fact that the action remains with the subject:  
*Corn grows in the fields. Elvis sang all over the world.*

Both transitive and intransitive verbs are **action verbs**.

**3. Incomplete Verbs**  
There are three types of incomplete verbs:

i. **being verbs** – also called linking or copulative verbs  
*to be, seem, become, taste, smell, sound, feel*

**Tip**: Some of these verbs can also be used transitively. If in doubt, substitute a form of to be for the verb. If the sentence still makes sense, the verb is being used as a copulative verb:

*He feels depressed. He is depressed.  
He feels the wall. He is the wall.*

**ii. auxiliary verbs** – also called helping verbs  
*be, have, shall, will, do*, and *may*.  
*He could have gone earlier.*

**iii. semi-auxiliary verbs**  
*must, can, ought, dare, need*.  
*You must not go. You dare not go.*

**Verbs Voice**

English verbs are said to have two voices: active and passive.

**Active Voice**: the subject of the sentence performs the action:

*His son catches fly balls. Creative children often dream in class.*

**Note**: Verbs in the active voice may be either transitive or intransitive.

**Passive Voice**: the subject receives the action:

*The ball was caught by the first baseman.  
The duty is performed by the new recruits.  
The dough was beaten by the mixer.  
The mailman was bitten by the dog.*

Only transitive verbs can be used in the passive voice. What would be the direct object of the verb in the active voice becomes the subject of the verb in the passive voice:

Active voice: *The dog bit the mailman*. “bit” is a transitive verb. The receiver/direct object is “mailman.”

Passive voice: *The mailman was bitten by the dog*. “bit” is now in the passive voice. The “receiver” has become the subject of the verb.

A passive verb in either present or past tense will always have two parts: some form of the verb *to be* (*am, is, are, was, were*), and a past participle (verb form ending in -ed, -en, or any form used with have when forming a perfect tense).

**Note**: The mere presence of the verb *to be* does not indicate that a verb is in the passive voice. The test of a verb in the passive voice is the two-part question:

Is the subject performing the action of the verb or is the subject receiving the action of the verb?

If the subject is receiving the action, then the verb is in passive voice.

Sometimes the passive voice is the best way to express a thought. Used carelessly, however, passive voice can produce a ponderous, inexact writing style.

**Verbs Mood**

English verbs have four moods: indicative, imperative, subjunctive, and infinitive.

Mood is the form of the verb that shows the mode or manner in which a thought is expressed.

1. **Indicative Mood**: expresses an assertion, denial, or question:

*Little Rock is the capital of Arkansas.  
Ostriches cannot fly.  
Have you finished your homework?*

2. **Imperative Mood**: expresses command, prohibition, entreaty, or advice:

*Don’t smoke in this building.  
Be careful!  
Don’t drown that puppy!*

3. **Subjunctive Mood**: expresses doubt or something contrary to fact.

Modern English speakers use indicative mood most of the time, resorting to a kind of “mixed subjunctive” that makes use of helping verbs:

*If I should see him, I will tell him.*

Americans are more likely to say:

*If I see him, I will tell him.*

The verb *may* can be used to express a wish:

*May you have many more birthdays.  
May you live long and prosper.*

The verb *were* can also indicate the use of the subjunctive:

*If I were you, I wouldn’t keep driving on those tires.  
If he were governor, we’d be in better fiscal shape.*

4. **Infinitive Mood**: expresses an action or state without reference to any subject. It can be the source of sentence fragments when the writer mistakenly thinks the infinitive form is a fully-functioning verb.

When we speak of the English infinitive, we usually mean the basic form of the verb with “to” in front of it: t*o go, to sing, to walk, to speak.*

Verbs said to be in the infinitive mood can include participle forms ending in -ed and -ing. Verbs in the infinitive mood are not being used as verbs, but as other parts of speech:

*To err is human; to forgive, divine*. Here, *to err* and to *forgive* are used as nouns.

He is a man *to be admired*. Here, *to be admired* is an adjective, the equivalent of *admirable*. It describes the noun *man*.

*He came to see you*. Here, *to see you* is used as an adverb to tell why he came.

**Verbs Tense**

Modern English has six tenses, each of which has a corresponding continuous tense.

The first three tenses, **present**, **past**, and **future**, present few problems. Only third person singular in the present tense differs in form:

Present tense of regular (weak) verbs:

*Today I walk. Today he walks.*

*Yesterday I walked.*

*Tomorrow I shall/will walk.*

The dwindling class of irregular (strong) verbs must be learned individually.

*Today I go. Today he goes.*

*Yesterday I went.*

*Tomorrow I shall/will go.*

The other three tenses, **perfect**, **pluperfect**, and **future perfect**, are formed with the helping verbs *have, has*, and *had*.

**perfect**: used to express an event that has just finished, and to describe an event which, although in the past, has effects that continue into the present.

*Queen Elizabeth has reigned for 56 years*.

**pluperfect** (past perfect): used to express an event that took place before another action, also in the past.

*I had driven all the way to Oklahoma when I realized my mistake.*

**future perfect**: used to express an event that will have taken place at some time in the future.

*As of February 26, I shall have been in this job six years.*

For complete conjugation tables of weak and strong English verbs, see the Wikipedia article.

**Adverbs**

Adverbs are used to **describe** or **modify** a verb, adjective, clause, or another adverb. Basically, they modify everything except nouns and pronouns (which are modified by adjectives).

Example of an adverb modifying a verb: *He was running fast*. (*fast* modifies *running*)

Example of an adverb modifying an adjective: *She took a very small piece of the cake.* (*very* modifies *small*)

Example of an adverb modifying a sentence: *Strangely, the man left the room.* (*strangely* modifies the whole sentence)

Usually adverbs answer to the questions “**When?**” (adverbs of time), “**Where?**” (adverbs of place), and “**How?**” (adverbs of manner).

Adverbs can also be used to connect clauses and sentences (in this case they are called **conjunctive adverbs**).

For example: *It was dark. Therefore, we needed the torch*. (*therefore* connects the two sentences)

**Prepositions**

Prepositions are used to **link nouns and pronouns** to other words within a sentence. The words linked to are called **objects**.

Usually prepositions show a spatial or temporal relationship between the noun and the object, like in the example below:

*The cat is under the table.*

*Cat* is the noun. *Under* is the preposition. *Table* is the object.

Here is a list with the most common prepositions: *about, above, after, among, around, along, at, before, behind, beneath, beside, between, by, down, from, in, into, like, near, of, off, on, out, over, through, to, up, upon, under,* and *with*.

Notice that you can also have a prepositional phrase, which is formed by the preposition and its object. A preposition phrase can function as adverb, adjective or noun. For example:

*The dog was running under the rain.*

The prepositional phrase “under the rain” acts as an adverb, specifying where the dog was running.

**Conjunctions**

A **conjunction** joins words and groups of words.

There are two classes of conjunction: **co-ordinate** or **coordinating** and **subordinate** or **subordinating**.

**Co-ordinate conjunction**s: *and, but, either…or, neither…nor*.

**Subordinate conjunctions**: *that, as, after, before, since, when, where, unless, if*.

*Mother and Father are driving me to New Orleans*. (**and** is a coordinate conjunction joining words of equal significance in the sentence.

*I painted the walls but Jack painted the woodwork.* (**but** is a coordinate conjunction joining clauses of equal significance in the sentence. Either clause could stand alone as a sentence.)

*Since you can’t get away, we’ll go without you.*  
(**Since** is a subordinate conjunction joining a less important thought to a more important thought. The main clause, *we’ll go without you*, can stand alone as a complete thought. The subordinate clause, *Since you can’t get away*, is an incomplete thought. It is dependent upon the main clause for meaning.)

**Note**: The relative pronouns *who, whom, which*, and *that* are used in the same way that subordinate conjunctions are. The difference is that the relative pronouns serve three purposes at once:

1) they stand for a noun in the main clause  
2) they connect the clauses  
3) they serve as a subject or object word in the subordinate clause:

*He is the man who invented the hula hoop.* (**who** stands for *man* and is the subject of *invented*)

*Charles is the boy whom the other children tease*. (**whom** stands for *boy* and is the object of *tease*)

*Give me the piece of string that is waxed.* (**that** stands for *string* and is the subject of is *waxed*)

*There goes the horse which won the Derby*. (**which** refers to *horse* and is the subject of *won*)

The possessive adjective **whose** can also be used to join clauses:  
*That’s the bird whose plumage I admire.* (**whose** refers to *bird* and describes *plumage*)

**Interjections**

Interjection comes from from a Latin word that means “throw between.” It’s a word or phrase that is thrown into a sentence to express an emotion:

***Goodness****, how you’ve grown!****Darn****, I forgot my lunch!****Alas****, will he never return?*

All the impolite expressions that we call expletives are interjections.

Strictly speaking, an interjection is not a part of speech. It serves no grammatical function but is rather “a noisy utterance like the cry of an animal” (F.J. Rahtz). Interjections express feeling or emotion, not thought and have been called “the miserable refuge of the speechless.”

If you’ve ever stood lunch duty on a high school campus, you know just how vapid conversation can be when larded with meaningless interjections.