

Unit 1: Understanding English Sentence Structure

To master correct sentence structure, you need to understand how sentences are organized grammatically. This unit explains the basis of English sentence structure—subjects and verbs. Most sentences in English follow the pattern below.

Subject + verb + words that complete the thought of the sentence

S	V	Direct Object	S	V	Subject Complement
<u>Yvette</u>	<u>won</u>	<u>the race.</u>	The <u>cake</u>	<u>looks</u>	<u>delicious.</u>

The core of the sentence is the connection between the subject and verb, which gives the sentence its essential meaning. If you can recognize subjects and verbs, you are on your way to creating sentences that express your ideas clearly and correctly.

Recognizing Verbs

1. One way to recognize verbs is to know what they do. A verb can express
 - a physical or mental action: *run, write, take, give, think, calculate, hope*
 - a state of being: *be* (e.g., *am, is, are, will be*), *seem, look*
 - a state of owning: *have, possess, own*
 - a sensation (*feel, smell, taste*)

NOTE: Some verbs can express more than one thing, depending on how they are used. Look at the differences in the meaning of *look* and *taste* in the following sentences.

I looked at him in total surprise. (*Looked* expresses an action.)

You look tired today. (*Look* expresses a state of being.)

Jerome tasted the soup. (*Tasted* expresses an action.)

The soup tastes salty. (*Tastes* expresses a state of being.)

2. Another way to recognize a verb is to look for the word(s) in the sentence whose form will change if you change the time of the sentence, e.g., from present to past or future.

Fred eats lunch at noon.

To find the verb, change the time of the sentence.

Yesterday, Fred ate lunch at noon. OR

Tomorrow, Fred will eat lunch at noon.

The word in the first sentence that changes form is *eats*. Therefore *eats* is the verb.

Exercise

Directions: Underline the verb in each of the following sentences. **NOTE:** If you see *to* in front of a verb, e.g., *to include*, that word does not function as a verb in the sentence.

1. At the beginning of a university term, students are generally happy about taking new courses and making a new beginning.
2. Unfortunately, over the term, natural motivation fades.
3. Around midterm, students start to have doubts.
4. They feel unsure about being able to learn enough material in the course to pass.
5. However, by setting realistic goals and working hard to achieve them, students will succeed in their studies.

Recognizing Subjects

The easiest way to recognize the subject in a sentence is first to find the verb. Then look for the word(s) in front of the verb that answers the question “Who or what?”

Marian wants a new CD player for Christmas.

- (a) Find the verb by changing the time of the sentence: Marian will want a new CD player for Christmas. [The change is in “will want.”]
- (b) The verb in the original sentence is *wants*.
- (c) Ask, “Who wants a new CD player for Christmas?”
- (d) The answer to the question is *Marian*. Therefore *Marian* is the subject.

Skiing in the mountains is dangerous in the spring.

- (a) Change the time: Skiing in the mountains was dangerous in the spring.
- (b) The verb in the original sentence is *is*.
- (c) Ask, “What is dangerous in the spring?”
- (d) The subject is skiing.

Exercise

Directions: Underline the subject in each of the following sentences.

1. Jake does not have the right attitude to succeed at university.
2. Unfortunately, he expects the professors to hand out knowledge to him.
3. However, the professors want students to take responsibility for their own learning.
4. Successful students regard assignments and tests as opportunities to learn.
5. They want to accept the challenges set by their professors.

