

Elementary English

“Grammar is worthless if it doesn’t make you a better writer.”

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returns you to this page.

Thank you, Mr. Spivey, wherever you are.



English Is Simple

There are eight parts of speech in the English language.

noun	verb
pronoun	adverb
adjective	conjunction
preposition	interjection

There are four types of sentences.

- subject-intransitive verb**
- subject-transitive verb-direct object**
- subject-linking verb-predicate nominative**
- subject-linking verb-predicate adjective**

There are four levels of sentence complexity.

- simple**
- compound**
- complex**
- compound-complex**

That's it! That's all there is to it. Everything we say and write, everything we read and hear, all communication in English breaks down to just eight parts of speech, four types of sentences, and four levels of sentence complexity. It's simple!



English Is Hard

If English is so simple, why is it so hard?

Face it, English is a difficult language. It's hard enough for native-speakers—take a moment to pity those who try to learn it as a second or third language!

English started out to be German but collided head-on with French. Old English and Old German were very similar. Old German became modern German, but Old English didn't. It didn't even come close.

In 1066 William the Conqueror invaded and conquered England. The defeated Anglo-Saxons spoke Old English while the triumphant Normans spoke French. The languages were split along class lines; peasants spoke Old English and nobility spoke French. For two hundred years the Normans ruled England, and during that time the two languages were shuffled together like a deck of mismatched cards.

Words with Germanic roots were considered vulgar or low-class words. Words with French roots—words with essentially the same meaning—were high-class words. We still divide some of the words we use into “polite” and “vulgar” categories; think about movie ratings for language! English words with French roots (and, by way of the French language, words with Latin or Greek roots) tend to be polysyllabic words: academic, educated, sophisticated, philosophical, literary.

German-root words remain essential for communication in English. Most of our short words have German roots, and you can write intelligible paragraphs using nothing but German-based words. You can't do the same with French-based words.

Read the poem “Jabberwocky” by Lewis Carroll. He uses mostly German-based words for the words you recognize like *and* or *the*. Then, instead of using French-based words, he invents his own made-up words.

Jabberwocky

by Lewis Carroll

‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.
“Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!”

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought—
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood awhile in thought.
And, as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!
One two! One two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.
“And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!”
He chortled in his joy.
‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outrabe.

Without knowing what a quarter of the words mean, you can still follow the story. Now try the reverse.

Atanah evening, qa fre slippery toads
Filt leaps qa gymnastics ekle fre water;
Plux misty atanu fre peaks,
Qa fre moths flew outside.

It’s much harder to generate any meaning out of the verse if the simpler words are the ones replaced!

What does it matter if English is based on two major root languages instead of one? Each language contributes different grammar, different usage—and different spelling. Try pronouncing each letter in *knight* phonetically, and you will be closer to the original Old English pronunciation.

Russian and Spanish are both phonetic languages; you could learn to read either one aloud very quickly. (You wouldn’t *understand* what you were reading, maybe, but you could pronounce the words correctly). English, however, is only semi-phonetic. To learn to read or spell, you not only need to learn the rules of phonics, but you need to learn all kinds of exceptions to the rules. There are even exceptions to the exceptions!

I before E except after C

That spelling rule is simple enough, and it covers a lot of English words. But there are a lot of exceptions. So we add to the rule.

Or when sounding like A
As in *neighbor* or *weigh*.

OK, great. But there are still more exceptions, even to the expanded rule (partly because so many immigrants came to the United States and brought with them words from still more languages). There are some words we spell with *ie* after *c*. Notice that in each case given here, you can hear both the *i* and the *e* pronounced if you read them aloud.

conscience
prescient
science
society

And some words we spell with *ei* even though there is no *c* in front and the *ei* doesn't sound like an *a*.

codeine	either	height	seize
deify	feisty	heist	sheik
deity	forfeit	neither	sovereign
dreidel	foreign	peignoir	surfeit
eider	heifer	seismic	weird

***Weird* is right! No wonder English is such a tough language!**



English Is Rich

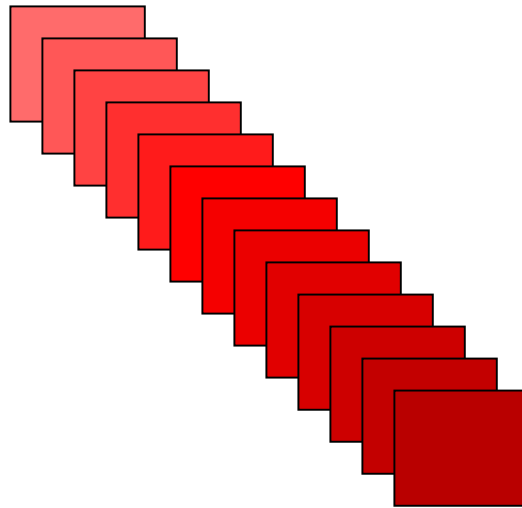
On the other hand, English has a tremendously rich vocabulary, the largest in the world. An unabridged English dictionary is big—think of a New York City phone book. An unabridged Vietnamese dictionary is small—think of a Bainbridge Island, Washington, phone book.

What is the advantage to having more words? Different words take on different shades of meaning. By having so many words to choose from, each with its own subtle nuances, we can pick the exact words we need to convey information precisely.

Take the word *red*. Close your eyes for a bit and think of *red*. Which [red](#) did you see?

There are lots of reds to choose from!

blood-red
brick-red
burgundy
carmine
cherry
crimson
gules
magenta
maroon
rose
ruby
rust
scarlet
vermilion



Carmine is a rich red with a shade of purple.
Crimson is a deep or vivid red to purplish-red.
Maroon is a dark reddish-brown to dark purplish-red.
Rose is a purplish-pink.
Rust is a reddish-brown.
Scarlet is a strong, vivid red or reddish-orange.
Vermilion is a vivid red to reddish orange.

The single correct word carries accurate, detailed information packed inside it.

We English-speakers may have more trouble than most people in the world in learning how to read and spell, we may take longer to become proficient in manipulating our language, but—if we use our language well—we are less likely to be misunderstood than someone who is using a language with a more limited vocabulary.

**In computer terms,
English isn't particularly
user-friendly, but it's
a much more powerful
operating system.**



Besides, having a wealth of words to choose from opens up the possibilities for all kinds of word play.

More games can be played with it than with any other language, and to anyone who loves English, ... those games represent the purest fun one can have with nonmusical sounds.

Isaac Asimov
Isaac Asimov's Treasury of Humor
1972



Why Teach Grammar?

Grammar is one of the few places we stretch young minds by regularly engaging them in analytic thinking. Grammar investigates the structure of the English language, breaking it down into its parts and seeing how the parts interrelate with each other and the whole. Of course, because of the complexity of thinking involved, it takes more than one exposure to the study of grammar for a student to begin to grasp it. First-time students tend to concentrate on understanding the pieces of the puzzle; it takes a while for them to generate a mental picture of how the pieces fit together.

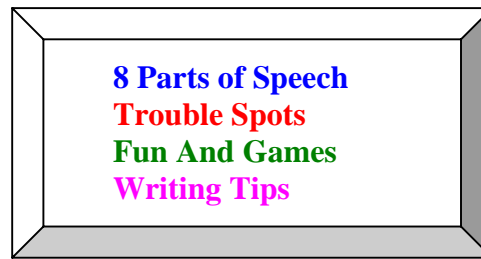
Studying English grammar prepares students to tackle a foreign language. The better they understand the structure of their own language, the easier time they will have learning another.

Most important, the study of grammar can powerfully and positively affect writing skill. Not only does an understanding of grammar help the writer avoid glaring errors, but it gives the writer a wider variety of stylistic tools to choose from.

Grammar learned at the basic knowledge and comprehension level—memorizing and explaining rules—is meaningless and tedious for most people. We need to take it to the next level. We need to show students how to apply lessons learned in grammar not just to correct errors in conventional usage but to synthesize and communicate ideas in original and powerful ways.



Parts of Speech



Noun

[person](#)
[place](#)
[thing](#)
[idea](#)
[singular and plural](#)
[verbals](#)
[noun phrase](#)
[noun clause](#)
[less vs. fewer](#)
[scale of specificity](#)
[appositive](#)
[nominative absolute](#)

Verb

[transitive](#)
[intransitive](#)
[linking](#)
[helping](#)
[verb phrase](#)
[tenses](#)
[active and passive](#)
[misplaced modifiers](#)
[lay vs. lie](#)
[verb puzzle](#)
[strong verbs](#)
[participial phrase openings](#)

Interjection

Pronoun

[personal pronouns](#)
[cases](#)
[2nd person familiar](#)
[demonstrative](#)
[indefinite](#)
[interrogative](#)
[numbers](#)
[relative](#)
[me vs. I](#)
[point of view game](#)
[clear antecedents](#)

Adverb

[time](#)
[place](#)
[manner](#)
[degree](#)
[negation](#)
[adverb phrase](#)
[comparisons](#)
[further vs. farther](#)
[only](#)
[Tom Swifties](#)
[adverb openings](#)

Adjective

[articles](#)
[descriptive](#)
[possessives](#)
[demonstrative](#)
[indefinite](#)
[interrogative](#)
[numbers](#)
[comparisons](#)
[good vs. well](#)
[adjective joke](#)
[adjective openings](#)
[adjective clauses](#)

Preposition

[50 to start with](#)
[prepositional phrases](#)
[adjectival phrases](#)
[adverbial phrases](#)
[as and than](#)
[Churchill stories](#)
[prepositional phrase openings](#)

Conjunction

[coordinating and correlative](#)
[subordinating](#)
[series](#)
[adverb clause openings](#)



Parts of Sentences

Basic Parts of Sentences

4 Types of Sentences

4 Levels of Sentence Complexity

Writing Tips

[complete subject](#)
[simple subject](#)
[complete predicate](#)
[simple predicate](#)
[intransitive verb](#)
[transitive verb](#)
[direct object](#)
[indirect object](#)
[predicate nominative](#)
[predicate adjective](#)
[independent clause](#)
[dependent clause](#)
[fragment](#)
[run-on](#)

[Subject-Intransitive Verb](#)
[Subject-Transitive Verb-Direct Object](#)
[Subject-Linking Verb-Predicate Nominative](#)
[Subject-Linking Verb-Predicate Adjective](#)

[Simple Sentence](#)
[Compound Sentence](#)
[Complex Sentence](#)
[Compound-Complex Sentence](#)

[vary sentence lengths](#)
[vary sentence types](#)
[vary sentence openings](#)
[other stylistic devices](#)



Noun

A noun is one part of speech. A noun is a person, place, thing, or idea.

A common noun names a general person, place, thing, or idea and is not capitalized. A proper noun names a specific person, place, thing, or idea and is capitalized.

Most nouns name something you can count and are called count nouns. Those nouns you can count have singular and plural forms. You can use them in a sentence with a number in front of them or with the words *some*, *many*, *several*, *few*, *a*, *an*, or *the*. Nouns that you can count come in singular and plural forms.

Not every noun names something you can count, though. Nouns that name things you can't count are called mass nouns. You don't put numbers in front of them. You can use mass nouns with *some*, *much*, or *the*.

Verbals are words that started out life as verbs. Some verbals can be used as nouns in a sentence.

A noun phrase is a group of words that together act as a noun. A noun clause is a clause that acts as a noun.

Show off your skill with nouns by learning the difference between less and fewer.

Play with a Scale of Specificity to choose the words you want.

Improve your writing by occasionally using a noun clause, an appositive, or a nominative absolute.



Person

A *person* **noun** may be a common noun or a proper noun.

Common nouns

girl
boy
man
woman
president
mother
son

Proper nouns

Sally
Thomas
Abraham Lincoln
Mary Todd
George Washington
Abigail
John

Why is the word *president* sometimes capitalized and sometimes not? Titles are only capitalized if they are used as part of the name or if they are used in place of the name.

The president signed the bill into law.

The aide asked President Lincoln if he could keep the pen.

The senator rose to speak.

A colleague asked Senator Jackson if he would yield to a question.

An aide said, “We need more paper, Senator, so I will run to the store before lunch.”

Why is the word *mother* sometimes capitalized and sometimes not? Family relationships are only capitalized if they are used as part of the name or if they are used in place of the name.

“I am meeting my grandfather for lunch.”

“I’d like you to meet Grandpapa Jefferson.”

“I don’t know if I can go out right now. I have to ask my mother.”

“Samuel wants me to go to a meeting, Mom. Is that all right with you?”

Samuel Adams and John Adams were cousins.

“You should have heard Cousin Samuel’s speech!”

Common or proper, the examples of *person* nouns above are all count nouns.

one female
two males
three children
an adult

few congressmen
many fathers
several daughters

Can you imagine what would happen if we cloned a dozen George Washingtons?

There are three Samuels in their family tree.



Place

A *place* **noun** may be a common noun or a proper noun.

Common nouns

mountain
river
ocean
city
town
highway

Proper nouns

Alleghenies
Potomac
Atlantic
Boston
Concord

Why is the word *city* sometimes capitalized and sometimes not? Place words are only capitalized if they are used as part of the name. Place nicknames are capitalized, too.

We went to New York City.
The city was full of people.
Sometimes people call New York the Big Apple.

Generally speaking, you can assume that *place* nouns are count nouns. Most times there is just one example of a specific place.

one hill
two streams
a lake
few villages
several roads
many inns

one Walden Pond

I visited two Romes, one in Italy and one in New York state!



Thing

A *thing* **noun** may be a common noun or a proper noun.

Common nouns

apple
horse
pony
tree
painting
ship
opponent
ally
document

Proper nouns

Macintosh
Black Beauty
Merrylegs
Freedom Tree
Washington Crossing the Delaware
Constitution
English
French
Declaration of Independence

Why do so many animal names get capitalized when not all of them do? Many animal breeds are named after people or places. Because the original word was a proper noun, in the United States we tend to capitalize the derived word, too; in your reading you might notice that British writers tend not to capitalize derived words as often as we do.

Welsh ponies	named for	Wales
Dalmatians	named for	Dalmatia
German shepherd	named for	Germany
St. Bernard	named for	a saint
Percheron	named for	La Perche (a region in Normandy)
Siamese	named for	Siam (now Thailand)
collie		
poodle		
mutt		

A *thing* **noun** may be a count noun or a mass noun.

Count nouns

grain
bale
cup
barrel
wisp
liter
leaf
bag

Mass nouns

sand
cotton
water
oil
smoke
oxygen
tobacco
money

Test to see if a noun is a count noun by trying it out with these adjectives: *some, many, several, few, a, an, or the.*

She had some chairs.
She had many chairs.
She had several chairs.
She had a few chairs.
She had a chair.
She had the chair.

Even proper nouns can be count nouns.

If my two friends and I each had a dog and we named each one King George, we would have three King Georges!

Try out the mass nouns with these adjectives: *some, much, or the.*

He had some furniture.
He didn't have much furniture.
He had the furniture.

A mass noun doesn't get a number put in front of it, but it may be measured anyway by using a unit of measurement with the word *of.*

a loaf of bread
a pound of rice
a bar of gold



Idea

Although you will sometimes see them capitalized in old books or old documents, an *idea noun* in the 21st century is almost always a common noun.

An idea noun is also called an abstract noun. All the other nouns are called concrete nouns. Calling them concrete doesn't mean that person, place, and thing nouns name things made of cement! It just means they name things that are solid. They refer to objects or things you can touch and feel and handle.

Abstract nouns name concepts. You can't hold an idea in your hands, but you can point to examples of how the idea is demonstrated or applied.

Common nouns

literacy
freedom
justice
love
bravery
patriotism
pride
spirit
will
determination
lightness
adolescence
energy
speaking
fighting

Proper Noun

Latin

language
slavery
corruption
indifference
cowardice
treason
humility
defeat
despair
laziness
darkness
age
fatigue
listening
voting

While most *idea nouns* are mass nouns, there are a few that you can count.

Lafayette spoke at least two *languages*, French and English.

When our soldiers' *spirits* were low and our army's *defeats* were many, Thomas Paine rallied the troops with his pamphlets.

"We hold these *truths* to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable *Rights*, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

We treasure our hard-won *freedoms* today, and we hope to pass them down through the *ages*.

Number nouns are *idea* nouns you can definitely count! Cardinal numbers are the ones we call whole numbers in math: zero, one, two, and so on. Ordinal numbers are the ones we use to tell the order of things.

The patriots met by *twos* and *threes*.

Our country is the *one* famous for the Declaration of Independence.

Of all our presidents, George Washington was the *first*.

Notice how *twos* and *threes* are the objects of the preposition *by*. *One* and *first* are both predicate nominatives.

Number nouns overlap with number pronouns, number adjectives, and time adverbs.



Singular and Plural Forms

Some plural forms of count nouns are regular, which means they follow the simple rule of adding an *s* to the singular form.

apple	apples
horse	horses
document	documents
tree	trees
painting	paintings
ship	ships
opponent	opponents

Unfortunately, there are lots of irregular plural forms. At least there are common patterns to many of them.

If a singular noun ends in *-s* or *-ss*, *-x* or *-z*, *-ch* or *-sh*, add *-es* to form the plural.

dress	dresses
box	boxes
church	churches
dish	dishes

There are exceptions. If a singular noun ends in *-is*, it may change the *-is* to *-es* to form the plural. (The *-es* at the end of the plural form is pronounced with a long *e* sound). If a singular noun ends in *-ex* or *-ix*, it may change the *-ex* or *-ix* to *-ices* for the plural. (And if you read publications that follow British rules of spelling, you will see even more examples of the latter.)

analysis	analyses
crisis	crises
vertex	vertices
vortex	vortices

If a singular noun ends in a *consonant* and a *-y*, change the *y* to *i* and add *-es* to form the plural.

pony	ponies
ally	allies
spy	spies
penny	pennies

On the other hand, if a singular noun ends in a *vowel* and a *-y*, or if the singular noun is a proper noun, just add an *-s* to form the plural.

boy	boys
valley	valleys
turkey	turkeys
Germany	Germanys

If a singular **noun** ends in *-f* or *-fe*, change the *f* to *v* and add *-es* to form the plural.

shelf	shelves
hoof	hooves
wife	wives
knife	knives

If a singular **noun** ends in *-o*, it might add an *-s* or an *-es* to form the plural. You just have to learn which is which. To make it even harder, some plural forms can be written either way! Chances are your spell-check will only accept one version, though, so learn to follow that spelling.

piano	pianos
soprano	sopranos
veto	vetoes
hero	heroes
cargo	cargoes (or cargos)
motto	mottoes (or mottos)

Some singular **nouns** change their internal vowel sounds to form the plural.

man	men
goose	geese
mouse	mice
foot	feet

Some singular and plural forms follow their original Old English rules and are very different from each other. Some nouns follow the rules of other languages that they came from.

child	children
ox	oxen
cherub	cherubim

Science often uses Latin roots to form English words and in the past followed Latin rules for making their plural forms. More and more of those plurals—but not all—can now be spelled following standard English rules. These spellings are so much in transition that your spell-check may accept either spelling as correct. Just make sure that you are consistent in the forms you use!

bacterium	bacteria
datum	data

cactus	used to become <i>cacti</i>	now can become <i>cactuses</i>
formula	used to become <i>formulae</i>	now can become <i>formulas</i>
curriculum	used to become <i>curricula</i>	now can become <i>curriculum</i> s

Some singular **nouns** that end in *-on* change the *-on* to an *-a* to form the plural.

phenomenon	phenomena
criterion	criteria

Some singular nouns don't change at all. The plural form is the same as the singular. Many of these nouns refer to game animals or fish. Remember Dr. Seuss's book *One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish!*

one salmon	two salmon
one moose	two moose
one sheep	two sheep
one offspring	two offspring

Then there are the singular **nouns** that look like plurals. They don't change, either.

one barracks	two barracks
one headquarters	two headquarters
one gallows	two gallows

Finally, there are collective nouns. They act like singular nouns and take singular verb forms, but they refer to a bunch of people or things. When there is more than one bunch, they can take plural forms with plural verb forms: one bunch of carrots *is*, two bunches of carrots *are*.

armada	clutch	family	panel
army	collection	flotilla	party
band	colony	forest	pile
batch	company	gaggle	pod
bed	congregation	gang	pride
bevy	constellation	herd	school
board	convoy	hive	staff
brood	corps	horde	stand
bunch	coven	host	string
cache	covey	house	swarm
cast	crew	huddle	team
chain	crowd	litter	tribe
chorus	deck	lock	troop
class	den	lot	troupe
clump	drove	mob	yoke
cluster	faculty	pack	

Please notice that plural nouns never use apostrophes. *No apostrophes!*

PLURAL NOUNS NEVER USE APOSTROPHES!

You think that's enough? I don't have to say it any more? I'm not so sure. Let's do it one more time.



Apostrophes *are* used with [possessive adjectives](#) that started life as nouns. It's not consistent, it doesn't make any sense, but that's the way it is. Sorry!



Verbals

Verbals are words or phrases that look like verbs but are used as different parts of speech in a sentence. Two types of verbals that act like nouns are gerunds and infinitives.

The participle form of a verb makes a gerund.

I like skiing.	skiing	=	<u>direct object</u>
Skiing is fun!	skiing	=	subject

The infinitive form of the verb includes the word *to*.

I want to go on a ski vacation.	to go	=	direct object
To ski takes some practice.	to ski	=	subject

Because of their roots in the world of verbs, verbal phrases can include adverb modifiers.

An experienced skier learns to ski quickly, safely, and well.

Driving with my friends up to the mountains is my favorite way to hit the slopes.



Noun Phrases

A noun phrase includes a **noun** and the words directly in front of it that modify it.

If you see an **article**, look for a noun following it, maybe with some additional modifiers in between.

a book

an experience

the description

an exciting book

an extremely intense experience

the vivid and memorable description

A noun phrase in a sentence can be a subject, a direct object, an indirect object, an object of a preposition, or a predicate nominative.

An exciting book engages the emotions of the reader.

“An exciting book” is the subject of the sentence, “the emotions” is the direct object, and “the reader” is the object of the preposition *of*.



Noun Clauses

A noun clause is a dependent clause that acts as a noun.

Use the relative pronouns *who*, *whoever*, *whom*, or *whomever* at the beginning of a noun clause that has to do with people.

Whomever Claire picks as vice-president will do well, I'm sure.

Whoever is going to speak to us will need to get here soon.

“*Whomever* Claire picks as vice-president” is the subject of the independent clause, which can be simplified to “she will do well.” *Whomever* is the direct object of the noun clause; you know to use the objective case because you can substitute in other objective case pronouns to make “Claire picks her.”

“*Whoever* is going to speak to us” is the subject of the independent clause, which can be simplified to “he will need to get here soon.” *Whoever* is the subject of the noun clause; you know to use the nominative case because you can substitute in other nominative case pronouns to make “he is going to speak to us.”

Use *what*, *whatever*, or *that* at the beginning of a noun clause that has to do with places, things, or ideas.

If the speaker doesn't show up, I wonder what we will do.

I've heard a lot about him; whatever he talks about is sure to be interesting.

That we need to get started soon is becoming more and more apparent.

A speaker should know that punctuality is important!

“*What* we will do” is the direct object of the independent clause, which can be simplified to “I wonder something.” *What* is the direct object of the noun clause. “*Whatever* he talks about” is the subject of the independent clause which can be simplified to “it is sure to be interesting.” *Whatever* is the object of the preposition *about* in the noun clause.

“*That* we need to get started soon” is the subject of the independent clause, which can be simplified to “It is becoming more and more apparent.” “*That* punctuality is important” is the direct object of the independent clause, which can be simplified to “a speaker should know that.”

Notice that the *that* in each of the last two sample sentences doesn't serve a sentence function in the noun clause. It just serves to introduce the clause. In situations like these, writers often drop the word *that*; we say that the *that* is understood.

A speaker should know (that) punctuality is important!

Because a noun clause acts as a noun, it only takes a comma if the noun would need a comma in the sentence.



Less vs. Fewer

Some nouns are count nouns and some are mass nouns. Count nouns name things you can count. They have singular and plural forms.

one chair, two chairs, three chairs	lots of chairs	more chairs
one house, two houses, three houses	lots of houses	more houses
one garden, two gardens, three gardens	lots of gardens	more gardens

Mass nouns name things you can't count. They just use the singular form.

furniture	lots of furniture	more furniture
land	lots of land	more land

Both kinds of nouns follow similar patterns for a while. Then they go their separate ways.

some chairs	several chairs	many chairs	
some houses	several houses	many houses	
some gardens	several gardens	many gardens	
some furniture			much furniture
some land			much land

The newlyweds had many chairs but not much other furniture.
Developers planned many new houses on not much land.

Most people don't have too much trouble until they get to the difference between *fewer* and *less*. Count nouns use *fewer*.

fewer chairs
fewer houses
fewer gardens

Mass nouns use *less*.

less furniture
less land

The new family moving in had fewer tables, fewer chairs—less furniture over all than their neighbors.

With less land available close to town, fewer houses could be built there.

There are fewer mass nouns than count nouns, so you have less practice using them. ☺



Scale of Specificity

Choose the right noun for the job!

Say you are writing a horse story. You have a handful of words that you might normally choose to refer to one of the horses. Construct a Scale of Specificity to expand on the pool of words that you will use.

On one end put the most general words or phrases and on the other end put the most specific. Start at either end. Use a thesaurus for additional ideas.

matter material stuff
living thing
creature animal beast
vertebrate
mammal
domesticated animal
beast of burden
farm animal
horse pony
mount steed
charger cutting horse jumper hunter
Arab Belgian Morgan
foal colt filly stallion mare
Blaze

You can use a Scale of Specificity as a tool for picking a research topic, too. “Horses” may be too broad a topic, and your mare “Blaze” may be too narrow, but “Cutting Horses” might work just fine.

(You don’t know what cutting horses are? Cowboys use them to cut a single steer out of a herd. Cutting horses start and stop quickly and can spin in place).



Appositive

An appositive, like a predicate nominative, renames a noun or pronoun. Unlike a predicate nominative an appositive does not follow a linking verb. An appositive directly follows the noun or pronoun it renames.

Milagros, a high school student, was entered in the barrel race.
She rode past the stand, a set of aluminum bleachers unprotected from the broiling sun.
When her turn came, she rode with grit—a determination to excel—that won her the race.
She, the new barrel-racing champion, jogged her winning horse Ginger out of the ring.

The appositive “a high school student” renames “Milagros.” The appositive uses different words to tell again which person is the subject of the sentence.

The appositive “a set of aluminum bleachers unprotected from the broiling sun” renames “the stand.” The appositive uses different words to tell again which thing is the direct object of the sentence.

The appositive “a determination to excel” renames “grit.” The appositive uses different words to tell again which thing is the object of the preposition “with.”

The appositive “the barrel-racing champion” renames “she.” The appositive uses different words to tell again which person is the subject of the sentence.

The appositive “Ginger” renames “her winning horse.” The appositive uses different words to tell again which thing is the direct object of the sentence.

Usually an appositive is surrounded with commas. Occasionally you will choose to surround it instead with dashes. A very short appositive involving nothing but a name might take no punctuation at all.

Try to use an appositive every page or two.



Nominative Absolute

Here's an impressive tool to add to your writing repertoire! A nominative absolute starts with a noun or pronoun followed by a participial phrase. It modifies the entire sentence it is attached to.

Barbara had butterflies in her stomach as she cantered her horse into the ring, the event being her first exposure to competitive barrel racing.

She waited nervously for her signal to begin, her inexperience dominating her thoughts.

She being a beginner and all, her score wasn't that impressive.

You won't use a nominative absolute often, but it's fun to throw one in every once in a great while.



Pronoun

A pronoun is one part of speech. A pronoun takes the place of a noun or another pronoun. If we didn't have pronouns, we would have to keep saying nouns over and over.

Billy came to school and put Billy's books on Billy's desk.
Billy asked Claire if Claire had finished Claire's spelling homework.

Talking like that would be *annoying!* Pronouns really help us.

We divide personal pronouns into first person, second person, and third person. Like nouns, we also divide personal pronouns into singular and plural. Singular pronouns refer to a single person, place, thing, or idea; plural pronouns refer to more than one person, place, thing, or idea.

Personal pronouns are categorized into sets or groups, called cases, according to how they are used to do different kinds of work.

Second person familiar pronouns have almost completely disappeared from English, but you will still run into them in literature, so it helps to know what they mean and how they work.

Like personal pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, indefinite pronouns, and number pronouns act alone to take the place of a noun in a sentence. Interrogative pronouns are used to form questions while relative pronouns are used to begin dependent noun or adjective clauses.

Show off your skill with pronouns by using me and I correctly.

Play the Point of View game.

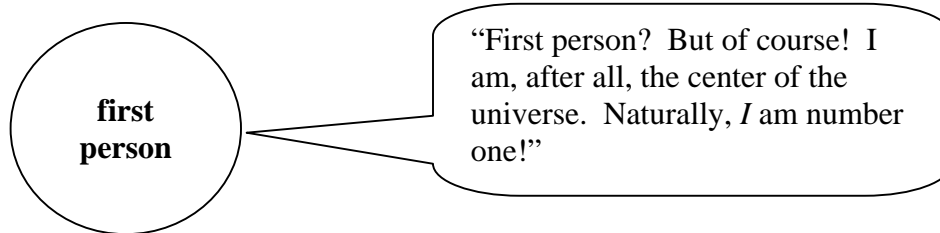
Improve your writing by making sure your antecedents are clear.



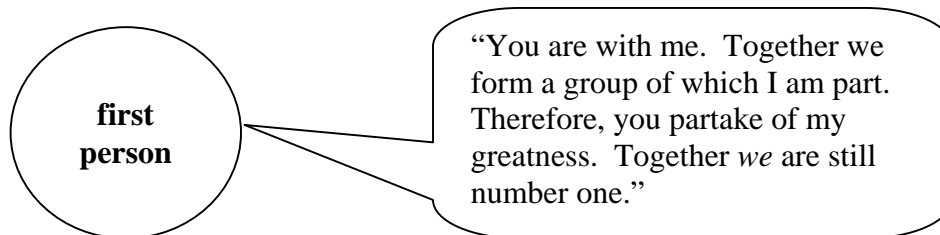
Personal Pronouns

The way we organize personal pronouns into first, second, and third person can sound just the tiniest bit conceited.

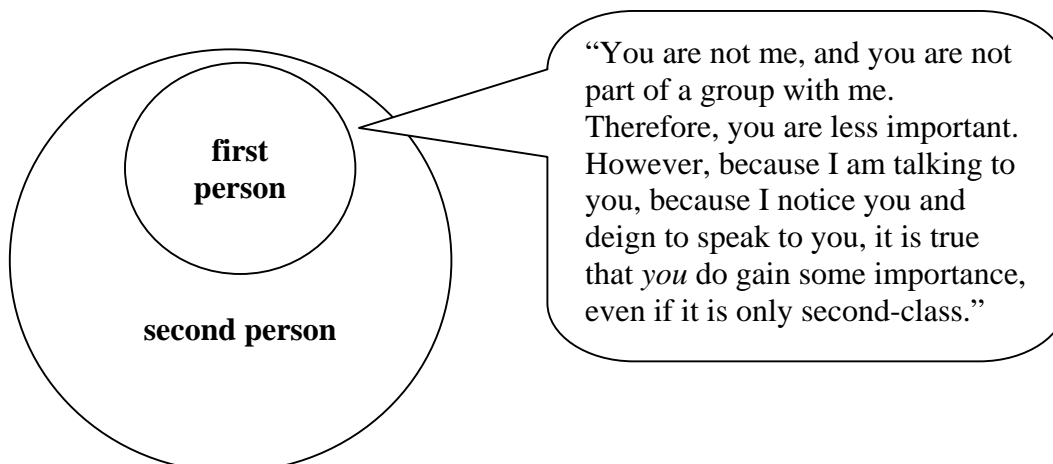
Singular first person pronouns include *I, me, myself, my, mine*.



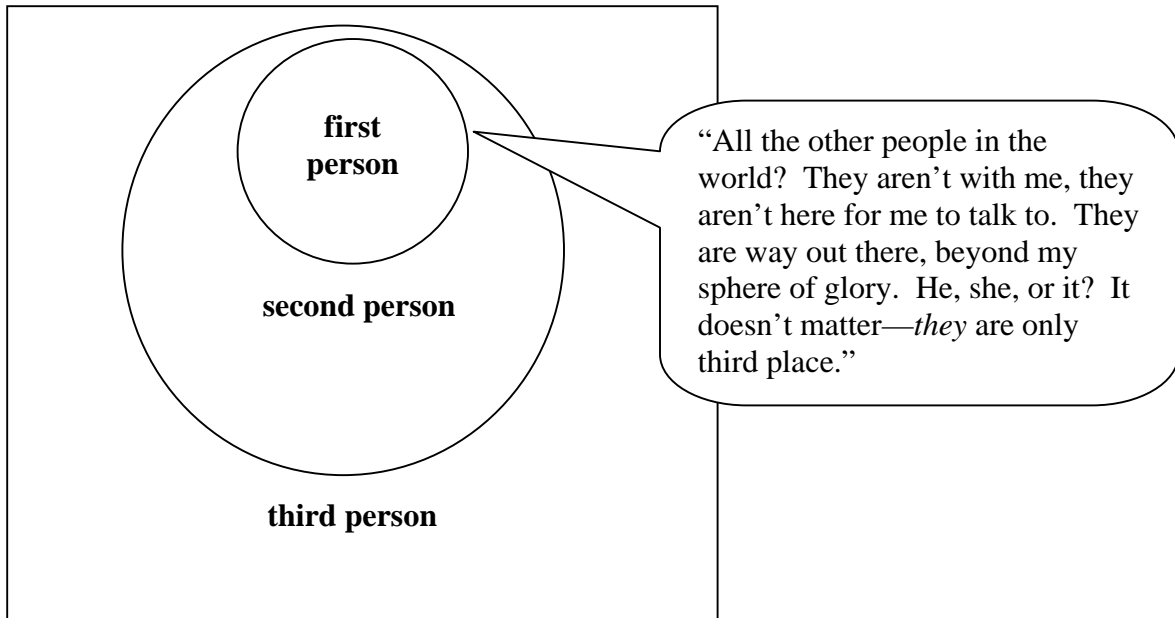
Plural first person pronouns include *we, us, ourselves, our, ours*.



Singular and plural second person pronouns include *you, yourself, yourselves, your, yours*.



Third person pronouns include *he, she, it, they, him, her, them, himself, herself, itself, themselves, his, her, hers, its, their, theirs.*





Cases

The fact that we organize personal [pronouns](#) into first, second, and third person *and* into singular and plural forms can sound just the tiniest bit confusing. Then add in the separate categories for [nominative](#), [objective](#), [reflexive](#), and [possessive](#) cases, and it can seem overwhelming.

To make it easier, we put the pronouns of each case into individual grids. You don't think grids make it easier? Trust me, they actually work pretty well. And you may as well get used to them; they are a standard format.

The nice thing is, when you take Spanish or Japanese, your teacher will use similar grids to teach you the Spanish or Japanese pronouns. If you understand how the format works in English—and how the pronouns work in English—it will make learning a foreign language easier.

Nominative case pronouns	singular	plural
first person	I	we
second person	you	you
third person	he, she, it	they

The word *nominative* comes from a Latin word meaning *name*, so nominative case [pronouns](#) can stand in for the name of a person.

<i>I</i> am Jan.	<i>I</i>	=	Jan
<i>You</i> are Dave.	<i>you</i>	=	Dave
<i>She</i> is Colleen.	<i>she</i>	=	Colleen
<i>We</i> are the Kragens.	<i>we</i>	=	Kragens
<i>They</i> are the Allens.	<i>they</i>	=	Allens

Nominative case pronouns are used for the subject of a sentence.

I nominate Claire for president.
She would do a good job.

A nominative case pronoun is also used for a predicate nominative, but you won't hear many people follow that rule. Don't bother trying to follow it out on the playground, but when you get to a college or a job where you hear people doing it, don't correct them. They are the ones doing it right! By that point in your life, maybe you want to start doing it right, too.

It is <i>I</i> .	<i>it</i>	=	<i>I</i>
It is <i>he</i> .	<i>it</i>	=	<i>he</i>
This is Jan speaking. This is <i>she</i> .	<i>this</i>	=	<i>she</i>

Objective case pronouns	<u>singular</u>	<u>plural</u>
<u>first person</u>	me	us
<u>second person</u>	you	you
<u>third person</u>	him, her, it	them

Objective case pronouns are used for a direct object.

Ted is here. I saw *him* in the hall.
 He delivered a letter. I'll give *it* to Claire.
 Then I'll help *them* get organized.

Objective case pronouns are used for an indirect object.

Get *me* some more paper.
 Hand *her* a gavel.
 Throw *him* a pencil.

Objective case pronouns are used for the object of a preposition.

Look for more paper behind *her*.
 Pass the gavel to *me*.
 Take the pencil from *him*.

Reflexive case pronouns	<u>singular</u>	<u>plural</u>
<u>first person</u>	myself	ourselves
<u>second person</u>	yourself	yourselves
<u>third person</u>	himself, herself, itself	themselves

Reflexive case pronouns can follow a noun or pronoun subject, adding emphasis.

Claire *herself* called the meeting to order.
I *myself* gave the first speech.

However, a reflexive case pronoun is never used alone as the subject of the sentence; you would never say, “Myself went to the meeting” or “Claire and myself went to the meeting.”

Reflexive case pronouns can be used as a direct or indirect object when the action of a transitive verb is reflected back directly or indirectly to the subject.

Claire reminded *herself* to listen carefully to each speaker.
She often gave *herself* advice.
When she saw a friend sit in a wobbly chair, she said, “Don’t fall and hurt *yourself*.”

Reflexive case pronouns can be used as the object of a preposition; sometimes the preposition is left out of the sentence but is “understood.”

Her friend answered back, “I can take care of *myself*.”
Claire noted to *herself* that her friend did not care for her warning.
She went back to taking notes (by) *herself*.

Reflexive case pronouns are usually only used in prepositional phrases that tell how something is done, not when or where; you would not say, “Claire later gave the notes to myself” or “Claire later gave the notes to my friends and myself.” It is much better to say that she gave the notes to me.

Possessive case pronouns	<u>singular</u>	<u>plural</u>
<u>first person</u>	mine	ours
<u>second person</u>	yours	yours
<u>third person</u>	his, hers, its	theirs

Possessive case pronouns indicate ownership or possession.

The chair belongs to me. It is *mine*.
The gavel belongs to her. It is *hers*.

There are also possessives that some grammar books identify as pronouns and some as determiners. Even if these words started out life as pronouns, they function in sentences as adjectives, modifying nouns. Notice how they parallel and overlap with the possessive case pronouns in the grid above.

Possessive pronouns that act like adjectives (determiners)	<u>singular</u>	<u>plural</u>
<u>first person</u>	my	our
<u>second person</u>	your	your
<u>third person</u>	his, her, its	their

Please notice that the possessive personal pronouns and their companion possessive adjectives never use apostrophes. Look at the grids—*no apostrophes!*

POSSESSIVE PRONOUNS NEVER USE APOSTROPHES!

You think that's enough? I don't have to say it any more? I'm not so sure. Let's do it one more time.



The only time you will ever use an apostrophe with a pronoun is in a contraction.

I	+	am	=	I'm
you	+	have	=	you've
he	+	had	=	he'd
it	+	is	=	it's
we	+	are	=	we're
they	+	will	=	they'll

On the other hand, and just to confuse things, apostrophes *are* used with [possessive adjectives](#) that started life as nouns. It's not consistent, it doesn't make any sense, but that the way it is. Sorry!



Second Person Familiar

Back in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, you would have used different second person [pronouns](#) for people who were above you or beneath you on the social scale. You would have used second person *formal* if you were speaking to your elders, to those of higher rank or station, or to those in authority over you.

You would have used second person *familiar* with children, with family, and with friends.

Nominative case pronouns	singular	plural
first person	I	we
second person formal familiar	you thou (later in history ye)	you ye
third person	he, she, it	they

Like any other nominative case [pronouns](#), *thou* and *ye* are used as the subject of the sentence.

Thou art my friend.
Thou wilt sup with me.
Where wert thou?
Wherefore art thou late?

You are my friend.
You will have supper with me.
Where were you?
Why are you late?

Objective case pronouns	singular	plural
first person	me	us
second person formal familiar	you thee	you thee
third person	him, her, it	them

Like any other objective case [pronoun](#), *thee* is used as a direct object, indirect object, and the object of a preposition.

I shall support thee.
I will give thee aid.
I offer help to thee.

Reflexive case pronouns	singular	plural
first person	myself	ourselves
second person formal familiar	yourself thyself	yourselves
third person	himself, herself, itself	themselves

Like any other reflexive case [pronoun](#), *thysel*f is used with a subject to show emphasis, or as a direct object or indirect object when the action of a transitive verb reflects back directly or indirectly on the subject, and as the object of a preposition that tells how an action was done.

Thee thysel canst come to table.
 Wash thysel.
 Pour thysel some drink.
 Take for thysel good meat.

You yourself can come to eat.
 Wash yourself.
 Pour yourself something to drink.
 Take good food for yourself.

Possessive case pronouns	singular	plural
first person	my, mine	our, ours
second person formal	your, yours	your, yours
familiar	thy, thine	
third person	his, her, hers, its	their, theirs

Like any other possessive case [pronouns](#), *thy* and *thine* are a pair that indicate ownership or possession.

Take thy place at table.
 It is thine.

Take your place at the table.
 It is yours.

English speakers have dropped the familiar personal pronouns almost entirely. Your spell-check may not recognize any of the second person familiar words—or their verb forms. It doesn't mean you won't encounter them. They show up in a variety of literature, from *The Secret Garden* to the *Bible* to Shakespeare to hymns to stories about Quakers (the Friends Society). Whenever you see them, remember they most often indicate a sense of relationship—between family or friends or a common social group.

Thou usest them with whomever thou feelest most familiar! ☺



Demonstrative Pronouns

As you demonstrate how to do something, you point and use gestures to help in your explanations. **Pronouns** that are used to *point* back to a **noun** or to strongly identify a place, thing, or idea noun are called demonstrative pronouns.

This, that, these, those, and such are all used as demonstrative pronouns.

Claire's sixth grade teacher taught her to take notes. *This* is a good idea.
She learned to listen for main points first. *Those* were most important.
Claire took her notes home to study. She thought, "I'll look over *these* tonight."
If she took careful notes, she would be more successful. *Such* was her understanding.

This is a subject referring back to "to take notes." *Those* is a subject referring back to "main points." *These* is a direct object referring back to "notes."

To check if you are using demonstrative pronouns correctly, replace the demonstrative pronoun with its **antecedent**.

To take notes is a good idea.
Main points were most important.
"I'll look over (my) notes tonight."
(That) she would be more successful was her understanding.

Demonstrative pronouns overlap with **demonstrative adjectives**.



Indefinite Pronouns

Something that is indefinite is vague, imprecise, uncertain, not explicit. [Pronouns](#) that are used for general rather than specific people, places, things or ideas are called indefinite pronouns. They can be used for subjects, predicate nominatives, direct objects, indirect objects, objects of prepositions.

Some indefinite pronouns give the sense of *all*.

all	<i>All</i> of us went to eat at our favorite restaurant.
each	The waitress gave <i>each</i> of us a menu.
everybody	We waited for <i>everybody</i> to decide.
everyone	<i>Everyone</i> was patient.
everything	<i>Everything</i> listed on the day's specials looked good.

Some indefinite pronouns give the sense of *some*.

several	We checked out the appetizers. There were <i>several</i> .
few	We decide to order a <i>few</i> .
many	<i>Many</i> came right away.
some	We had to wait for <i>some</i> .

Some indefinite pronouns give the sense of *any*.

any	If you go there, try a burger. <i>Any</i> will do.
anybody	<i>Anybody</i> will tell you how great they are.
anyone	I've never met <i>anyone</i> who wasn't a satisfied customer.
anything	Trust me. You can order <i>anything</i> and be happy.

Some indefinite pronouns give the sense of *one*.

another	If you order dessert, you will want <i>another</i> .
one	<i>One</i> is never enough.
somebody	<i>Somebody</i> on a diet would have a hard time there.
someone	Of course, you could always share with <i>someone</i> .
something	<i>Something</i> that good you will want to eat by yourself.

Some indefinite pronouns give the sense of *none*.

nobody	After dinner <i>nobody</i> felt like running around.
none	<i>None</i> of our plans for the evening sounded good.
nothing	We just wanted to sit around and do <i>nothing</i> but digest!

Indefinite pronouns overlap with [indefinite adjectives](#).



Interrogative Pronouns

Picture an interrogation, the detective questioning the suspect. Can you see why pronouns that are used to form questions are called interrogative pronouns? The interrogative pronouns include *which*, *whichever*, *what*, *whatever*, *who*, *whoever*, *whom*, and *whomever*.

Use *which*, *whichever*, *what*, *whatever* and *whose* with things and ideas.

Which is yours?
Whose is this?
What happened to the seating chart?
Whatever is the matter here?

Use *who*, *whoever*, *whom*, and *whomever* with people. *Who* and *whoever* are nominative case, so use them for the subject of a question. If you're not sure, fill in another nominative case pronoun and see if it fits.

Who will sit in front? They will sit in front.
Whoever organized this meeting? She organized the meeting.

Whom and *whomever* are objective case, so use them for the direct object, indirect object, or the object of a preposition in a question. It is true, *whom* and *whomever* are disappearing from common usage, so you won't hear many people using them. Often, if people do use them, they use them incorrectly! Be careful. If you're not sure, fill in another objective case pronoun and see if it fits.

Whom did we pick for chairman? Did we pick her for chairman?
To *whom* should I address my questions? Should I address my questions to him?

Interrogative pronouns overlap with interrogative adjectives.



Number Pronouns

Numbers can be used as [pronouns](#) when they take the place of nouns.

Cardinal numbers are the ones we call whole numbers in math: zero, one, two, three and so on.

As Scott divided the chores among his many younger siblings, he assigned *one* to wash dishes, *two* to dust and vacuum, *three* to do the laundry and ironing, and *four* to help him with the outside jobs of mowing, raking, weeding, and pruning.

Notice that there is no [article](#) or other modifier in front of the numbers, which would turn them into nouns, and there is no noun following them, which would turn them into adjectives within a [noun phrase](#).

Number pronouns overlap with [number nouns](#), [number adjectives](#), and [time adverbs](#).



Relative Pronouns

Relative **pronouns** are used at the beginning of a **adjective clause** or a **noun clause**. The relative pronoun serves as the subject or an object within the dependent clause.

Some relative pronouns fall into cases, just like personal pronouns do.

Nominative case relative pronouns include *who*, *whoever*.

She *Who Must Be Obeyed* is Rumpole's wife in the *Rumpole of the Bailey* series.

Objective case relative pronouns include *whom*, *whomever*.

Rumpole's wife, *whom he seems to acquiesce to*, doesn't really get her way all the time.

or

Rumpole's wife, *to whom he seems to acquiesce*, doesn't really get her way all the time.

Whose is the relative pronoun that acts as an adjective in a sentence—a **possessive adjective**.

Her father, *whose firm Rumpole works for*, was a barrister in the English courts.

or

Her father, *for whose firm Rumpole works*, was a barrister in the English courts.

Which, **whichever**, and **that** are not specifically tied to one case.

The charms *for which he married her* have long since faded from memory.

Rumpole uses his office, *which isn't far away*, as an escape from his home.



Me vs. I

You would never use an objective **pronoun** for the subject of a sentence. For example, you don't say, "Me go to the library."

Even if you add extra words, you still don't use the objective pronoun for a subject. You don't say, "Can me go to the library?" In the same way, you don't say, "Can me and my friend go to the library?" No, you say, as properly as possible, "May my friend and I go to the library?" (If you say it that way, I bet your teacher will answer yes!)

You would never use a nominative pronoun as an object. You don't say, "Give the book to I." Even if you add extra words, you still don't use the nominative pronoun for an object. You don't say, "Give the book to my friend and I." You don't say, "Give the book to she and I." You don't say, "We can share this book between her and I."

Instead, you quite correctly say any of the following:

Give the book to me.

Give the book to my friend and me.

Give the book to her and me.

Give the book to us.

We can share between her and me.

We can share between us.

If you are not sure which kind of pronoun to use, take out the extra words. Or look at the plural form. In other words, if you would say *we* in that place in the sentence, then you would use *I* or *he* or *she* or *they* in the same place. On the other hand, if you would say *us* in that place in the sentence, then you would use *me* or *him* or *her* or *them* in the same place.



Point of View Game

Playing this game requires some understanding of the [first](#), [second](#) and [third](#) persons of [personal pronouns](#).

Start by imaging some situation, some attitude, some behavior, some appearance—something. Then think about how to describe the exact same situation, attitude, behavior, appearance—or whatever—from three different points of view.

First person point of view will put things in the best possible, most complimentary light.

Second person point of view will put the same things in less flattering but still tactful terms.

Third person point of view will put the same things in the least positive light.

Examples of Point of View game entries can be simple or elaborate. See what you can make up, and share your ideas with your friends!

First person:	I am assertive.
Second person:	You are aggressive.
Third person:	He is rude.

First person:	My perfume is subtle with hints of the exotic.
Second person:	Frankly, my dear, don't you think your scent is a <i>bit</i> strong?
Third person:	Whew! She stinks!



Clear Antecedents

Ante means *before*. An antecedent is something that comes before something else. Since a pronoun takes the place of a noun, a pronoun's antecedent is the noun or pronoun that the pronoun refers back to.

Whenever you write, you must make sure that every pronoun's antecedent is clear. Readers have trouble understanding your writing if you don't have clear antecedents, and if readers can't understand what you write, then what's the point?

One common problem includes having too many choices for a possible antecedent.

Sentence: Lou called Jerry while he was in town.

Problem: Was Lou in town? Or was Jerry?

Sentence: The night Sharon was visiting Corinne, she said she would call Lou.

Problem: Which girl is the pronoun referring to? Lou wants to know!

Sentence: Lou liked visiting Seattle. It was cool.

Problem: What was cool? Was it a cool trip? Did Lou think the city was a hip, cool place? Was the weather cool? (It probably *was* cool in Seattle, but was commenting on the weather what the author had in mind?)

Another common problem is using a vague pronoun without a specific antecedent.

Sentence: This is a problem.

Problem: What is a problem? Is the problem not knowing which girl called? Is the problem that Lou is the one who wants to know? Or is the problem something to do with vague pronouns without specific antecedents?

If you write a sentence with *this*, *that*, *these* or *those* as the subject, ask yourself, *this what?* *That what?* If you have a hard time figuring out which word or words could fit in there, so will your readers.

Once you do figure out exactly what you meant with your vague subject, you may decide to rewrite the sentence entirely into something much cleaner and more interesting.

This was a problem.

This confusion about which girl had called him was a problem.

Not knowing which girl had called him was driving Lou crazy.

Which brings us to a current issue in the realm of clear antecedents—gender-neutral pronouns.

There used to be a neutral pronoun. Once upon a time, you might have used the word *one* for speaking about individuals who might be male or female.

One should bring one's school supplies with one on the first day of school.

Unfortunately, the use of *one* as a neutral pronoun has almost disappeared, and where it is used it often sounds stilted.

There was a second solution, called the “generic male.” If a noun could apply equally to male and female, the pronouns referring back to that noun were male. There was a general understanding that those pronouns applied equally to male and female.

Each student should bring *his* school supplies with *him* on the first day of school.

By the 1970s women questioned the concept of the generic male, for political as much as for grammatical reasons. After all, they argued, “all men are created equal” *could* be an example of the generic male, applying equally to men and women. In reality, though, it took over 100 years and some hard fighting for women to begin to gain equal protection under the law. So the generic male concept fell into disrepute. Older people still use it and will argue for it, but younger people reject it, so it will inevitably die out.

So what do we do instead? One fairly ugly solution is to try to mention everyone, male and female, each time a pronoun comes up; the wordiness of this solution defeats the basic purpose of pronouns.

Each student should bring *his/her* school supplies with *him/her* on the first day of school.
Each student should bring *his or her* school supplies with *him or her* on the first day of school.

He/she will receive *his/her* books from the teacher.
S/he will receive *his/her* books from the teacher.

One way to solve the problem is to alternate references to male and female. This option works rather well in books or articles that tell multiple stories, anecdotes, or case studies. It can be very awkward and confusing in short pieces.

Each student should bring *his* school supplies with *him* on the first day of school.
On the first day of school every student will receive *her* books from the teacher.

Another way to deal with the issue is to rewrite everything in the plural or in the second person.

Students should bring *their* school supplies with *them* on the first day of school.

You will receive *your* books from the teacher.

Finally, there is the solution that breaks a basic rule of grammar, the rule that says every pronoun must agree with its antecedent in number, case, and gender. If the noun or pronoun being referred back to is plural, then the pronouns following it have to be plural, too. Most examples sound right and cause no problems.

Sally brought *her* school supplies. She got *her* books.

Linus forgot *his* school supplies and left *his* books at school.

Sally brought *her* supplies, and Linus didn't, but they both got *their* books.

They brought *their* supplies and got *their* books.

The pronouns *someone, somebody, everyone, everybody, one, none, and nobody* are all singular pronouns. If one of them is used as the antecedent, then the pronouns that refer back should be singular, too. However, you will see that rule broken more and more as people use plural pronouns following those singular antecedents.

Everyone should bring *their* school supplies with *them* on the first day of school.

Everybody will receive *their* books from the teacher.

The old folks are all screaming in pain. “No, no, no! Lack of agreement! Bad writing! Stop that!”

On the other hand, the young folks bridle at the generic male. “What do you mean—*he*? Shouldn't the girls bring their supplies, too? What are you implying, that only boys go to school?”

So there you have it. If you picture the English language as a gently-flowing stream, winding its way through time, gradually changing over the ages, then the gender-neutral issue is a patch of white water. Most solutions you pick are going to offend somebody. I want you to know all the options so you can recognize the problems and make informed decisions.

One can sound old-fashioned.

A writer needs to make his own decisions.

He or she should know the reasoning behind his or her choices.

Writers change their habits as the language changes.

Everyone should be able to support their choices.

No matter which alternative you pick, be consistent. And know that one teacher or another will mark you wrong no matter what you decide to do.



Adjective

An adjective is one [part of speech](#). An adjective modifies a [noun](#) or [pronoun](#)—that is, an adjective adds to the meaning or changes the meaning of the noun or pronoun. If an adverb tells *when*, *where*, *why*, and *how*, an adjective tells *which*.

Adjectives include [articles](#) and [descriptive adjectives](#).

Some adjectives overlap with some nouns and pronouns: [possessive](#), [demonstrative](#), [indefinite](#), [interrogative](#), and [numbers](#).

Adjectives can be used to make [comparisons](#).

Show off your skill with adjectives by learning the difference between [good and well](#).

See if you can figure out the [adjective joke](#).

Improve your writing by using [adjective clauses](#) and [adjective sentence openings](#).

As you continue to study grammar, you will find there are arguments over this particular set of words. In different times and places—and in different ways—English-speaking grammarians have split and reorganized them into separate categories.

Some list articles, determiners, and quantifiers within the broad umbrella of *adjectives*. Some lump articles and quantifiers under a separate heading of determiners. Some say that the only true adjectives are describing words or words that can be modified by an adverb.



Articles

Adjectives include the articles *a*, *an*, and *the*.

***A* and *an* are indefinite articles while *the* is the definite article. An indefinite article can refer to any example while the definite article refers to a specific example.**

a book (could be any book in the world)	the book (one book in particular)
an apple (could be any apple in the world)	the apple (one apple in particular)

Most nouns or their modifiers use the indefinite article *a*. Nouns or their modifiers that begin with a vowel sound use the indefinite article *an*.

a monkey	an ape
a snake	an anaconda
a fish	an eel
a rhinoceros	an elephant
a deer	an ibex
a spider	an insect
a gorilla	an orangutan
a muskrat	an otter
a beautiful animal	an ugly bug

What about “a unicorn”? The word *unicorn* may be spelled with a *u* at the beginning, but the *u* is pronounced *you*. The *y* sound is a consonant sound, so use the indefinite article *a*.

Some writers use *an* before a word starting with *h*; you will see that usage especially in older literature or with British writers. The more modern American way is to use *a*.

a hypothesis	an hypothesis
a historical event	an historical event

Whatever you use, be consistent. (Do a Google search for “*a hypothesis*” and “*an hypothesis*” to see how many sites use both versions in the same article!)



Descriptive Adjectives

The most familiar and easily identified [adjectives](#) are the descriptive adjectives.

Descriptive adjectives are most often found as part of a noun phrase, following an article or other adjective or adverb modifiers and in front of the noun they modify.

this *short* man
these *famous* presidents
some *fast-flowing* rivers
few *major* cities
five *minor* towns
a *worthy* opponent
his *multiple* allies
several *old* documents
her *incredible* bravery
our *abiding* patriotism

that *tall* woman
those *unsung* mothers
many *rugged* mountains
one very *proper* Boston
a more *modern* Concord
English tea
French toast
our *venerated* Declaration of Independence
their *extreme* cowardice
his *duplicitous* treason

Her *deep* and *powerful* pride in her child's accomplishments brought tears to her eyes.

Descriptive adjectives can appear at the beginning of a sentence, right before the subject, as an [adjective opening](#).

Deep and *powerful*, her pride in her child's accomplishments brought tears to her eyes.

Descriptive adjectives can appear right after a noun or a pronoun.

Her pride, *deep* and *powerful*, brought tears to her eyes.

Descriptive adjectives can appear right after a linking verb, describing the noun or pronoun in the subject.

Her pride in her child's accomplishments was *deep* and *powerful*.

As you can see, it is possible to use adjective placement to say essentially the same thing in several different ways. Don't limit yourself to one simple pattern. Once in while play around with a more unusual word order.



Possessive Adjectives

Some possessives started out life as [pronouns](#) and others started out life as [nouns](#) but, in terms of function, they are all used in sentences as [adjectives](#) modifying nouns and indicating ownership or possession. Call them all possessive adjectives.

Possessive adjectives overlap with [possessive pronouns](#). Possessive adjectives, though, never stand alone, taking the place of a noun the way a pronoun does. They are used as part of a [noun phrase](#). Remember, possessive adjectives that started out as pronouns never use [apostrophes](#).

Possessive adjectives	singular	plural
first person	my	our
second person	your	your
third person	his, her, its	their

The chair belongs to me. It is my chair.
The gavel belongs to her. It is her gavel.

Other possessive adjectives have their roots in nouns. While plural nouns *never* use [apostrophes](#), possessives formed from plural and singular nouns always *do* use apostrophes.

It gets worse. Indefinite pronouns *do* use the apostrophe for the possessive as well as for contractions.

anybody's
anyone's
anything's
everybody's
everyone's
everything's
nobody's
no one's
one's

Do you have anybody's phone number?
(the phone number belonging to anybody)

I don't think anybody's coming tonight.
(anybody is)

“Wait a minute,” I hear you cry. “You’re always harping on *us* to be consistent, and the English *language* isn’t even consistent! Ack! It’s not fair!”

What can I say? I agree. Apostrophe rules create one of the most obnoxious messes in the language. And you’re stuck with having to learn them. So here they are again.

The Evil Apostrophe

**Plural nouns never use it.
Noun-type possessives always choose it.
Oh, how people do abuse it.
The evil apostrophe.**

**Personal pronoun-type possessives never use it.
Contractions with pronouns always choose it.
Try as you might, you’ll never lose it.
The evil apostrophe.**

There, have we got that out of our system? OK. Moving right along . . .

Most singular nouns form the possessive by adding an apostrophe and an s.

girl's face

boy's hand

man's foot

woman's arm

ocean's waves

tree's branches

painting's techniques

ship's voyage

Sally's hair

George's knuckles

Abraham Lincoln's socks

Mary Todd's wrist

Atlantic's depths

Freedom Tree's history

Washington Crossing the Delaware's colors

the *Constitution's* captain

As for forming the possessive of singular nouns ending in s, different authorities will tell you different things. One possibility is to add just an apostrophe.

bus' route

One possibility is to add an apostrophe and an s.

bus's route

Another possibility is to add just an apostrophe if you don't hear the additional s sound and to add an apostrophe and an s if you do hear the additional s sound.

Charles' head

James's ankles

I prefer the last possibility, myself. Pick the rule you want to follow for singular nouns that end in -s and be consistent.

Most plural nouns end in -s and form the possessive by adding just an apostrophe.

opponents' plans

analyses' failings

boys' games

sopranos' voices

churches' steeples

ponies' bridles

knives' handles

cactuses' pots

Plural nouns that don't end in -s form the possessive by adding an apostrophe and an s.

children's television

data's implications

men's club

criteria's demands

Use the rule of thumb to check that you have formed possessives correctly. Use your right hand's thumb to cover everything on the right side of the word up to and including the apostrophe. Everything that is on the left—everything you can still see—is what is doing the owning or possessing.

CHILDREN' ← That's right, the children are doing the possessing.

CHILDRENS' ← That's wrong. *Childrens* isn't a word.



Demonstrative Adjectives

As you demonstrate how to do something, you point and use gestures to help in your explanations. Adjectives that are used to *point* to a noun or to strongly identify a place, thing, or idea noun are called demonstrative adjectives.

This, that, these, those, and such are all used as demonstrative adjectives.

Claire's sixth grade teacher taught her to take notes. *This* idea helped Claire do well. She learned to listen for main points first because *those* points were most important. Claire took her notes home to study. She thought, "I'll look over *these* notes tonight."

This modifies the noun *idea*. *Those* modifies the noun *points*. *These* modifies the noun *notes*.

Demonstrative adjectives overlap with demonstrative pronouns.



Indefinite Adjectives

If something is indefinite, it is vague, imprecise, uncertain, not explicit. [Adjectives](#) that are used for general rather than specific descriptions are called indefinite adjectives.

Some indefinite adjectives give the sense of *all*.

all	<i>All</i> restaurants are not equal.
each	The waitress gave <i>each</i> customer a menu.

Some indefinite adjectives give the sense of *some*.

several	There were <i>several</i> choices.
few	We decide to order a <i>few</i> appetizers.
many	<i>Many</i> orders came right away.
some	We had to wait for <i>some</i> drinks.

Some indefinite adjectives give the sense of *any*.

any	If you go there, try a burger. <i>Any</i> burger will do.
-----	---

Some indefinite adjectives give the sense of *one*.

another	You will want to go again to try <i>another</i> burger.
one	<i>One</i> dessert is never enough.

Some indefinite adjectives give the sense of *none*.

no	<i>No</i> dinner is better than theirs!
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Indefinite adjectives overlap with [indefinite pronouns](#).



Interrogative Adjectives

Picture an interrogation, the detective questioning the suspect. Can you see why adjectives that are used to form questions are called interrogative adjectives? The interrogative adjectives include *which*, *whichever*, *what*, *whatever*, and *whose*.

Which seat is yours?

Whose seat is this?

What mishap occurred with the seating chart?

Whatever arrangement are the chairs supposed to be in?

Which modifies the noun *seat*. *Whose* modifies the noun *seat*. *What* modifies the noun *mishap*. *Whatever* modifies the noun *arrangement*.

Interrogative adjectives overlap with interrogative pronouns.



Number Adjectives

Numbers can be used as adjectives when they modify nouns.

Cardinal numbers are the ones we call whole numbers in math: zero, one, two, and so on.

As Scott divided the chores among his many younger siblings, he assigned *one* sister to wash dishes, *two* brothers to dust and vacuum, *three* children to do the laundry and ironing, and the *four* oldest kids to help him with the outside jobs of mowing, raking, weeding, and pruning.

Ordinal numbers are the ones we use to tell the order of things.

He was the *first* runner to cross the finish line.

She was the *second-place* winner.

They tied for *third* place.

Number adjectives overlap with number nouns, number pronouns, and time adverbs.



Adjective Clauses

Also called a relative clause, an adjective clause is a dependent clause that modifies a **noun** or **pronoun**. The entire clause acts as an **adjective** does, modifying a noun or pronoun. Adjective clauses begin with a **relative pronoun**.

For adjective clauses that refer back to people, it is possible to use the relative pronoun *that*, but it is usually better to use the relative pronouns *who*, *whoever*, *whom*, and *whomever*. *Who* and *whoever* are **nominative case pronouns**, so use them when they act as the subject of the adjective clause.

Claire, *who* was elected president, called the meeting to order.

The girl *that* ran against Claire congratulated her and then suggested a speaker.

She said Mark, *whoever* he is, wants to make a presentation next month.

In the adjective clause “who was elected president,” *who* is the subject. In the adjective clause “that ran against Claire,” *that* is the subject. In the adjective clause “whoever he is,” *whoever* is the subject.

Whom and *whomever* are **objective case pronouns**, so use them when they act as an object of the adjective clause.

All the people *whom* Claire has recruited to work with her are top-quality.

One of them, *whomever* Claire picks, will be her vice-president.

Remember, put another pronoun in to see if the relative pronoun should be nominative or objective case. You would say “Claire has recruited *them*,” so you would also correctly talk about those “*whom* Claire has recruited.” You would say, “Claire picks *him*,” so you would also correctly say “Claire picks *whomever*.” If *whom* or *whomever* sounds too stilted for you, use *that* instead to make “all the people that Claire recruited” or “the one that Claire picks.”

Whose is a relative pronoun that acts like a **possessive adjective**.

Fred, *whose* job it is to keep things in working order, took the wobbly chair away.

You would say “it is *his* job,” so in this case you would use *whose*.

For adjective clauses that refer back to places, things, or ideas, use the relative pronouns *which*, *whichever*, and *that*.

The chair *that* Sally fell off of got stored in a closet.

The storage closet, *which* is in the basement, is full of broken junk.

Storing old things, *which* can look like a good idea, might just make a mess.

You don't need to worry about [cases](#) with *which*, *whichever*, and *that*—no wonder more and more people are using them and avoiding *who*, *whoever*, *whom*, and *whomever*! Don't be lazy, though. At the very least you should be able to use *who* and *whoever* correctly.

Do work on incorporating adjective clauses in your writing. You should be able to include one every page or two.

If the adjective clause is required for the sentence to make sense, don't use any commas; if you could drop it and still have a sensible sentence, surround the adjective clause with commas.



Adjective Comparisons

Like comparative adverbs, an adjective can be used to make comparisons.

Adjective comparisons are organized into three types: positive, comparative, and superlative. The positive just involves a statement using the adjective in its simple form.

Some books are good.

The comparative involves a comparison between two things (for a comparison involving just two things, always use the word *between* instead of *among*).

Some are better than others.
(comparing one group—some—with another group—others)

I think *Good Dog Carl* is better than *The Poky Little Puppy*.

The superlative involves a comparison among three or more things (for a comparison involving more than two things, generally use the word *among* instead of *between*).

The Phantom Tollbooth and *The Ordinary Princess* are my favorites. I consider them the *best* children's books.

For short words use the *-er* and *-est* endings.

smart	long
smarter	longer
smartest	longest

For short words that end in *-y*, change the *-y* to *i* and add *-er* or *-est* (unless there is a vowel before the final *-y*).

pretty	gray
prettier	grayer
prettiest	grayest

For longer words use the words *more* and *most*.

intelligent	complex
more intelligent	more complex
most intelligent	most complex

To go into opposite meanings, use the words *less* and *least* to form the comparative and superlative.

smart
less smart
least smart

intelligent
less intelligent
least intelligent

There are irregular comparative and superlative forms. As usual, the most commonly used words are the ones most apt to be irregular. Use a dictionary to check.

That is a *good* book.
That one is *better*.
That is the *best*.

I am glad he is *well* after being so sick.
He is *better* than he was last week.
His health is the *best* that it's been all year.

That was a *bad* movie.
That one was *worse*.
That was the *worst*.

I am getting *old*.
I have an *elder* brother.
My sister is the *eldest*.



Good vs. Well

Good is an adjective. An **adjective** always modifies a **noun** or **pronoun**, which means that it describes a noun or pronoun or alters its meaning.

Examples:

Explanation:

“Good girl!”

The adjective *good* modifies the person *girl*.

“a good spot for reading”

The adjective *good* modifies the place *a spot for reading*.

“a good book”

The adjective *good* modifies the thing *book*.

“Good thinking!”

The adjective *good* modifies the idea *thinking*.

I expect you often hear people say to you “good idea,” “good job,” and “good work.” I also expect that people tell you your work was done *well*.

Well is an adverb. An adverb generally modifies a **verb**. A verb will often show action. The adverb *well* can tell how an action was done.

Examples:

Explanation:

“You read well.”

The adverb *well* modifies the action verb *read*.

“You play ball well.”

The adverb *well* modifies the action verb *play*.

“You did well on that.”

The adverb *well* modifies the action verb *did*.

What I don’t expect you to hear is “you did good.” In that case the adjective *good* modifies the verb *did*. Oops! Adjectives don’t ever modify verbs!

You, of course, do very well in all your classes. You speak and write English well. Good job!



Adjective Joke

A beaver walked into a saloon and asked, “Is the bartender here?”

(Just keep in mind it’s an *adjective* joke).



Adjective Openings

One way to dress up your writing is to [vary your sentence openings](#), and one of the more unusual ways to open a sentence is with an [adjective](#). You won't want to start every sentence with an adjective opening.

Ecstatic, Traci hugged her new puppy.
Slippery, he wriggled from her arms and jumped around her feet.
Excited, Traci asked her parents if she could take him for a walk.
Patient, she waited until they had put a leash and collar on him.
Proud, she showed him off to her friends. "I'm naming him Popcorn," she announced.
Dismayed, she realized Popcorn had slipped out of his collar and was gone.
Sad and worried, she went home alone.
Concerned, her father went to search.
Triumphant, he returned with Popcorn.
Relieved, Traci kept Popcorn in her room with her that night.
Tired and content, they both slept well.

Too much is definitely not a good thing! Still, you ought to throw one into your writing every now and again. Just remember to use adjective openings lightly, like spice on food.

Adjective openings usually require a comma.



Preposition

A preposition is one [part of speech](#).

To start with, it helps to memorize [50 common prepositions](#).

Prepositions are used to form [prepositional phrases](#).

Some prepositional phrases are [adjectival](#). They act like adjectives, modifying nouns or pronouns.

Some prepositional phrases are [adverbial](#). They act like adverbs, modifying verbs.

Show off your skill with prepositions by understanding [as and than](#).

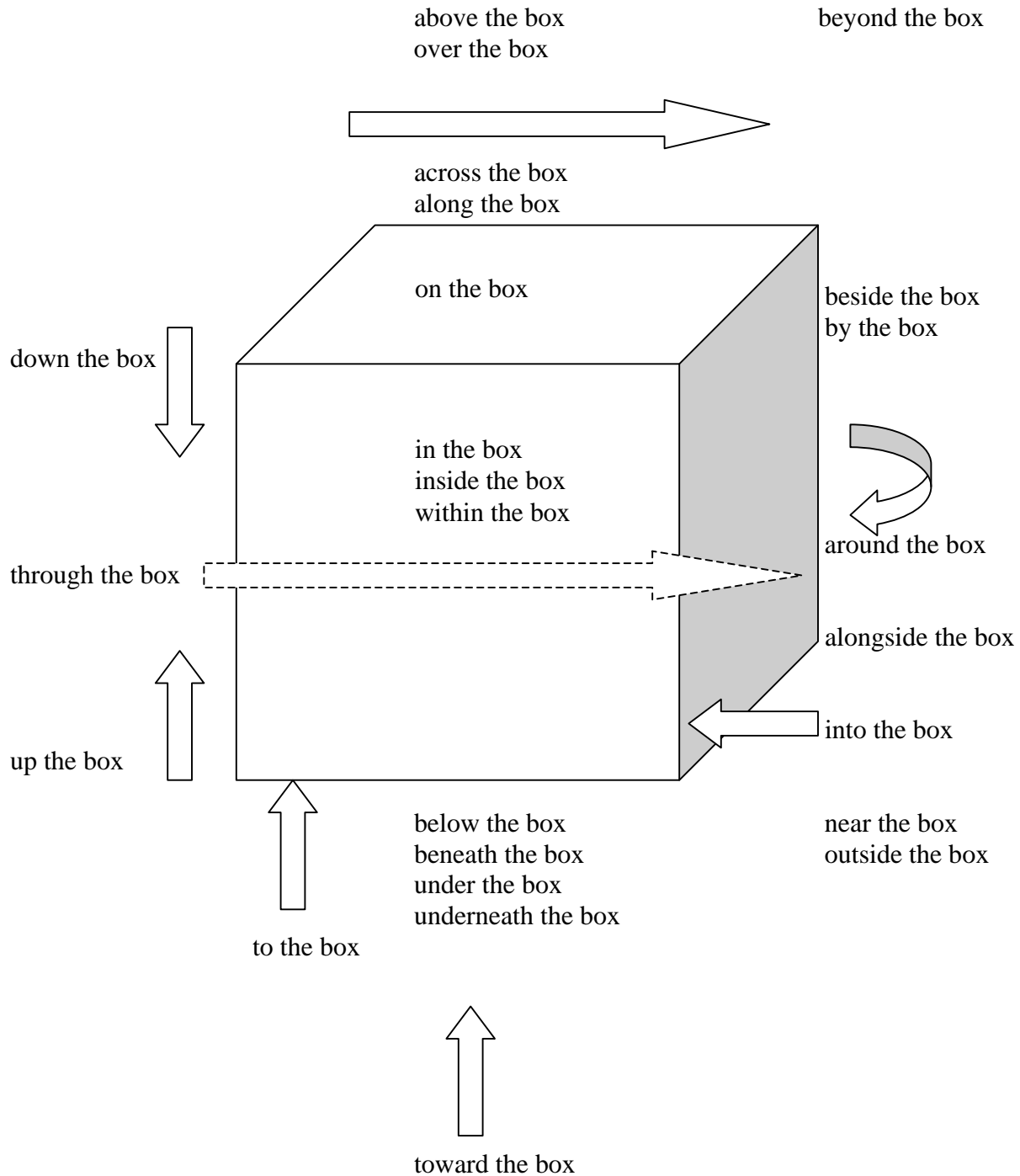
Ending a sentence with a preposition breaks a common rule—and [Churchill](#) didn't care.

Improve your writing by using [prepositional phrase sentence openings](#).



50 Common Prepositions

Prepositions can be the hardest part of speech to learn to identify. For many [prepositions](#), it is helpful to think in terms of location . . . and a box.



Prepositions are not limited to giving location, though. There are lots more prepositions in the English language. Because they can be hard to pick out until you really know them well, it can be a good idea to memorize a bunch.

about	before	concerning	like	through
above	behind	despite	near	to
across	below	down	of	toward
after	beneath	during	off	under
against	beside	except	on	unlike
along	besides	for	out	until
amid	between	from	outside	up
among	beyond	in	over	with
around	but	inside	past	within
at	by	into	since	without

As you may have noticed, there are several longer prepositions built from shorter ones.

alongside	amidst	excepting	throughout	underneath
	amongst	onto	towards	upon

Even *notwithstanding* is built from the preposition *with*!

There are shortened prepositions that come from longer ones.

round	till
-------	------

Sometimes you will find prepositions working together in pairs or more.

according to	because of	in between	near to	preparatory to
across from	but for	in favor of	next to	prior to
ahead of	by means of	in front of	on account of	regardless of
along with	close to	in lieu of	on board	save for
apart from	contrary to	inside of	on top of	thanks to
as for	depending on	in spite of	opposite to	together with
as to	due to	instead of	other than	up against
aside from	except for	irrespective of	outside of	up to
away from	forward of		owing to	up until

There are more prepositions, too—even more than the ones listed here! If you have trouble identifying a word, use a dictionary. Most will use the abbreviation *prep.* for a preposition.

aboard	circa	including	pending	save
astride	considering	minus	per	versus
bar	excluding	opposite	plus	via
barring	following		regarding	vis-à-vis



Prepositional Phrases

A prepositional phrase starts with a **preposition** and ends with a **noun** or **pronoun** that is the object of the preposition. There may be modifiers between the preposition and its object.

We climbed aboard the train.

It was hard to find our seats amid the milling crowd.

Considering the long wait, it's not surprising my little sister began to complain.

For a little while I just sat astride my bulging suitcase.

By the first station everyone, barring my father, had found a seat.

He stood opposite me in front of my mom and sister.

At the second station everyone in our car save my family exited the train.

For the rest of the trip, we had the car to ourselves.



Adjectival Prepositional Phrases

A prepositional phrase that modifies a noun or pronoun is acting like an adjective; therefore, it's an adjectival prepositional phrase.

The train trip to San Francisco was a gift from my parents to my sister and me.

“from my parents” tells which gift

“to my sister and me” also tells which gift

We looked at a brochure about San Francisco with a picture of the Golden Gate Bridge.

“about San Francisco” tells which brochure

“with a picture” also tells which brochure

“of the Golden Gate Bridge” tells which picture



Adverbial Prepositional Phrases

A **prepositional phrase** that modifies a **verb** is acting like an **adverb**; therefore it's an **adverbial prepositional phrase**.

Before our trip and during the train ride we studied the history of the city.

“before our trip” tells when we studied

“during the train ride” tells when we studied

Until our arrival, I hadn't realized how close the old fort was to the Golden Gate Bridge.

“until our arrival” tells when I realized

“to the Golden Gate Bridge” tells where the fort was

Being between the ocean and the bay keeps the city cool despite the summer sun.

“between the ocean and the bay” tells where it is

“despite the summer sun” tells how it keeps cool

Since our trip I decided I want to return without my family.

“since our trip” tells when I decided

“without my family” tells how I want to return

A preposition that is not attached to a prepositional phrase becomes an adverb.

My favorite part of the trip was when we went inside the Ghirardelli Chocolate Factory.
(adverbial prepositional phrase)

We could smell the chocolate long before we went *inside*.
(adverb)

We had to go down some steps to enter the room.
(adverbial prepositional phrase)

As soon as we could find a table, we sat *down*.
(adverb)

The quality of their desserts was outside the range of my experience!
(adverbial prepositional phrase)

We bought candy bars to take with us on our trip before we went back *outside*.
(adverb)



As and Than

In terms of making comparisons, *as* and *than* started out life as [conjunctions](#).

He is bigger *than* I am.

“he is bigger” is the independent clause

“than I am” is a dependent adverb clause

than is the subordinating conjunction

Notice that “I am” uses the [nominative case](#). There is a verb to go with the noun, so the noun is the subject of a clause.

She is *as* big *as* they are.

“she is big” is an independent clause

“as . . . as they are” is a dependent clause

as and *as* work together as subordinating conjunctions to compare her size and theirs

Again, “they are” uses the nominative case. There is a verb to go with the pronoun, so the pronoun is a subject.

In common speech, *as* and *than* are often used now as [prepositions](#) that make comparisons.

He is bigger *than* me.

“he is bigger” is the independent clause

“than me” is a prepositional phrase

Notice that *me* is in the [objective case](#) since it is the object of the preposition.

She is *as* big *as* them.

“she is big” is an independent clause

as and *as* work together as a preposition pair

Again, *them* is in the objective case since it is the object of the preposition.

In more formal standard usage you will see the nominative case used after *as* and *than* even if there is no verb following the pronoun to make it act like a subject of a clause. The verb is said to be understood.

He is bigger than I.

(short for “he is bigger than I am”)

She is as big as they.

(short for “she is as big as they are”)

If you are writing a formal paper and the standard usage sounds funny to you, go ahead and put the verb back in. How long will standard usage hold out? Probably as long as I do.



Churchill and Prepositions

There once was a hard-and-fast rule of grammar: “Never end a sentence with a [preposition](#).” That rule isn’t as rigid as it used to be, and we may have Sir Winston Churchill to thank.

One story is that someone criticized Churchill for breaking the rule in something he wrote. Apparently Churchill didn’t think much of the rule if following it made the sentence too convoluted. He supposedly replied with something along the lines of, “This is the sort of literary criticism up with which I will not put.”

There is a second story I first heard as attributed to Churchill as well. In the version I heard, he countered the objections of some purist grammarians with the claim that he could give an example of a perfectly good sentence ending in *five* prepositions.

Throughout his childhood Churchill’s mother read to him each night. One night she asked which book he preferred for that night’s reading. He said he wanted *Arabian Nights*, but instead she brought *The Knights of the Round Table*.

The young Churchill complained, “Mother, why did you bring the book I didn’t want to be read out of to up for?”

Both stories are apocryphal. We don’t know for sure that Churchill actually said either. They sound like him, though. And they’re fun stories no matter where they came from.



Prepositional Phrase Openings

One way to dress up your writing is to [vary your sentence openings](#), and one way to open a sentence is with a [prepositional phrase](#). You won't want to start every sentence with an prepositional phrase opening, but you might include as many as one or two in a paragraph.

For her birthday Traci got a new puppy.
In a flash he wriggled from her arms and jumped around her feet.
As a favor Traci asked her parents if she could take him for a walk.
Despite her impatience she waited until they had put a leash and collar on him.
On her way around the block she showed him off to her friends.
With a grin she announced, "I'm naming him Popcorn."
Out of his collar, Popcorn ran off and disappeared down the street
Near tears, Traci went home alone.
But for her father she might never have recovered her pet.
Like a triumphant knight he returned after a long search with Popcorn in his arms.
After his little escapade, Traci kept Popcorn in her room with her that night.

You can easily have more than one prepositional phrase at the beginning of a single sentence. While you may choose to use a comma even with a single prepositional phrase opening, most times a comma isn't required unless you use several prepositional phrases at the beginning of the sentence.



Verb

A verb is one [part of speech](#). Some verbs show an action while others link a predicate nominative or a predicate adjective to a subject.

Verbs can be [transitive](#) or [intransitive](#).

[Linking verbs](#) join a predicate nominative or predicate adjective to a subject.

Working together with an action verb, [helping verbs](#) create a [verb phrase](#).

Changes in verbs and verb phrases result in changes of [tense](#).

Verbs may be in [active or passive](#) voice.

Beware the [misplaced modifier](#)!

Show off your skill with verbs by learning the difference between [lay and lie](#).

See if you can solve the [verb puzzle](#).

Improve your writing by using [strong verbs](#) and [participial phrase openings](#).



Transitive Verbs

A transitive verb is a **verb** that transfers action from a subject to an object. A transitive verb is used in a **subject-transitive verb-direct object** sentence.

I *toss* the Koosh Ball (“Koosh Ball” is a registered trademark of the OddzOn Company).
I *drop* the Koosh Ball.
I *kick* the Koosh Ball.
I *retrieve* the Koosh Ball.
I *dangle* the Koosh Ball.
I *fling* the Koosh Ball.



If you think you have identified a transitive verb, ask yourself, “What object directly receives the action of the verb?”

The Koosh Ball is the object that directly receives the action of being *tossed*.
The Koosh Ball is the object that directly receives the action of being *dropped*.
The Koosh Ball is the object that directly receives the action of being *kicked*.
The Koosh Ball is the object that directly receives the action of being *retrieved*.
The Koosh Ball is the object that directly receives the action of being *dangled*.
The Koosh Ball is the object that directly receives the action of being *flung*.

The object that directly receives the action of a transitive verb is called, appropriately enough, a direct object. Do not be misled by an indirect object.

I *gave* Rebecca the Koosh Ball.
I *sold* Robert the Koosh Ball.
I *threw* Erika the Koosh Ball.

**“What object directly receives the action of the verb?” I ask.
I can see the glint in your eye as you respond, “Rebecca! Robert! Erika!”**

If Rebecca directly receives the action of being given, then who received her?
If Robert directly receives the action of being sold, then who *bought* him? And how much did he cost?
Erika directly receives the action of being thrown? Oh, dear. How much does she weigh?
Can I even pick her up, much less throw her?

Enough silliness. Rebecca, Robert, and Erika are all indirect objects. The direct object in each of the three examples is still the Koosh Ball. You can check that you have identified indirect objects correctly by converting them into objects of prepositions.

I *gave* the Koosh Ball to Rebecca.
I *sold* the Koosh Ball to Robert.
I *threw* the Koosh ball toward Erika.



Intransitive Verbs

An intransitive verb is a verb that does *not* transfer action from a subject to an object. An intransitive verb is used in a subject-intransitive verb sentence.

Some action verbs can be transitive or intransitive, depending on if they are used with a direct object or not.

I run.	intransitive
I run the lawn mower.	transitive
I walk.	intransitive
I walk the dog.	transitive
I see.	intransitive
I see the trees.	transitive

Some verbs are always transitive, requiring a direct object, and some are always intransitive, never taking a direct object.

I sit.	intransitive
I set the book down.	transitive
I rise.	intransitive
I raise the flag.	transitive

If you are not sure about a verb and whether you use a direct object with it or not, you can always check in a dictionary. Usually, a transitive verb will be labeled *v. tr.* while an intransitive verb will be labeled *v. intr.*



Linking Verbs

Some verbs link, or join, the subject to a predicate nominative or predicate adjective. Instead of indicating an action, these verbs indicate a state of being. In fact, the first set of linking verbs are the verbs of being, the verbs that derive from the infinitive verb *to be*.

am
is
are
was
were
be
being
been

I <i>am</i> a gardener.	subject - linking verb - predicate nominative
She <i>is</i> helpful.	subject - linking verb - predicate adjective
We <i>are</i> friends.	subject - linking verb - predicate nominative
He <i>was</i> hard-working.	subject - linking verb - predicate adjective
They <i>were</i> helpers.	subject - linking verb - predicate nominative
You will <i>be</i> educated.	subject - linking verb - predicate adjective
He is <i>being</i> the mower.	subject - linking verb - predicate nominative
She has <i>been</i> energetic.	subject - linking verb - predicate adjective

Some linking verbs have to do with how we use our senses to perceive the things around us.

appear	The roses <i>appeared</i> wilted.
look	The dahlias <i>looked</i> beautiful.
seem	The garden <i>seemed</i> well-tended.
smell	The daisies <i>smelled</i> awful.
sound	The fountain <i>sounded</i> pleasant.
taste	The berries <i>tasted</i> sweet.
feel	The sun <i>felt</i> warm.

Each of the verbs in the garden examples could be an action verb, but they are not used as action verbs in these sentences. The roses didn't appear—poof!—called forth by a magician. The dahlias didn't look around to see everything in the garden. (Picture dahlias with glasses!) The berries didn't pick something up to taste (in their little berry mouths). The sun didn't reach its hand down to feel anything. No, in each of these cases the verb links a predicate adjective to the subject.

There are other linking verbs.

After working all day in the garden, I *become* (or *get* or *grow*) tired.
Despite the work, I *remain* (or *stay*) a steadfast gardener.



Helping Verbs

In English we often use a helping [verb](#) (or auxiliary verb) to change [tense](#). The verbs of being may be used as helping verbs. Verbs of being, then, can be pretty versatile. They can be intransitive verbs, linking verbs, and helping verbs.

am
is
are
was
were
be
being
been

I <i>am</i> going to the nursery.	helping verb
He <i>has been</i> shopping with me.	helping verb
She <i>was</i> there, waiting for us.	intransitive verb
She had <i>been</i> patient.	linking verb

There are other helping verbs, three sets of triplets and three sets of twins. It's a good idea to memorize them all.

do	have	may
does	has	might
did	had	must
can	shall	will
could	should	would

The bride said "I <i>do</i> " by the trees.	intransitive verb
We <i>did</i> quite a job decorating.	transitive verb
He <i>does</i> plan garden weddings.	helping verb

When they are used as helping verbs, *do*, *does*, and *did* add emphasis. Saying that "he does plan" is more emphatic than saying "he plans."

Use the helping verbs *have*, *has*, and *had* to form the [perfect tenses](#).

The helping verbs *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, and *must* indicate possibilities, probabilities, and degrees of certainty.

I <i>can</i> (or <i>could</i>) garden.	I have the ability to garden.
I <i>may</i> (or <i>might</i>) garden.	I have permission or I may choose to garden.
I <i>must</i> garden.	I have to garden; it's required.



Verb Phrase

A verb phrase includes a verb and its helping verbs.

If you see a helping verb, look for a transitive or intransitive or linking verb following it, maybe with some additional modifiers in between.

The peonies *had been blooming* before the wedding.

Over 50 people *were coming*.

The DJ *had* often *played* for receptions.

He *had been* a DJ for three years.

A verb phrase can either show action, or it can link a subject to a predicate nominative or a predicate adjective.

The bride *has been* anxiously *counting* the days.

action

She certainly *does seem* excited.

linking



Tenses

A **verb** or verb phrase tells when an action or state took place by changing tenses. In English, we change most of our tenses by using helping verbs; other languages often change tenses by changing the verb internally or by changing the verb ending. Those changes within the word are called inflections. We change verbs through inflections, too, but on a very limited basis. In regular verbs the only inflections are the addition of *-s*, *-ed*, or *-ing* to the end of the verb.

The *simple* tenses tell when something is taking place from the speaker or writer's point of view: right now, in the past, or in the future.

In the *present* tense there is only one inflection change in a regular verb. Add *-s* to the end of the third person singular.

Present tense of regular verbs	singular	plural
first person	I walk	we walk
second person	you walk	you walk
third person	he, she, it walks	they walk

To form the *past* tense of a regular verb just add *-ed* to the end. The *-ed* form of the verb is called the past participle.

Past tense of regular verbs	singular	plural
first person	I walked	we walked
second person	you walked	you walked
third person	he, she, it walked	they walked

In the *future* tense there are no changes in a regular verb. Just use the helping verb *will* (or, less commonly, *shall*).

Future tense of regular verbs	singular	plural
first person	I will walk	we will walk
second person	you will walk	you will walk
third person	he, she, it will walk	they will walk

The *perfect* tenses can indicate that an action was completed, or made “perfect,” before something else happened. Perfect tenses can also indicate that something started in the past is still continuing up to the present. Perfect tenses use the past participle and the helping verbs *have*, *has*, and *had*.

In the *present perfect* tense there are no changes in a regular verb, but the helping verb is different for the third person singular.

Present perfect of regular verbs	singular	plural
first person	I have walked	we have walked
second person	you have walked	you have walked
third person	he, she, it has walked	they have walked

In the *past perfect* tense there are no changes in a regular verb. Just use the helping verb *had*.

Past perfect of regular verbs	singular	plural
first person	I had walked	we had walked
second person	you had walked	you had walked
third person	he, she, it had walked	they had walked

In the *future perfect* tense there are no changes in a regular verb, and the helping verbs stay the same. Just use the helping verbs *will have*.

Future perfect of regular verbs	singular	plural
first person	I will have walked	we will have walked
second person	you will have walked	you will have walked
third person	he, she, it will have walked	they will have walked

The *progressive* tenses indicate a continuing action. To form the *progressive* tenses of a regular verb just add *-ing* to the end. The *-ing* form of the verb is called the present participle. Progressive tenses use the present participle with helping verbs drawn from the verbs of being.

The *present progressive* tense uses the present tense of the verbs of being as helping verbs.

Present progressive of regular verbs	singular	plural
first person	I am walking	we are walking
second person	you are walking	you are walking
third person	he, she, it is walking	they are walking

The *past progressive* tense uses the past tense of the verbs of being as helping verbs.

Past progressive of regular verbs	singular	plural
first person	I was walking	we were walking
second person	you were walking	you were walking
third person	he, she, it was walking	they were walking

The *future progressive* tense uses the future tense of the verbs of being as helping verbs.

Future progressive of regular verbs	singular	plural
first person	I will be walking	we will be walking
second person	you will be walking	you will be walking
third person	he, she, it will be walking	they will be walking

As you may expect, the *progressive perfect* tenses can indicate a continuing action that was completed, or made perfect, before something else happened. Progressive perfect tenses can also indicate a continuing action that started in the past and is still continuing up to the present. Progressive perfect tenses use the present participle with the helping verbs *have*, *has*, *had*, and *been*.

The *present progressive perfect* tense uses *have* and *has* with *been* as helping verbs.

Present progressive perfect of regular verbs	singular	plural
first person	I have been walking	we have been walking
second person	you have been walking	you have been walking
third person	he, she, it has been walking	they have been walking

The *past progressive perfect* tense uses *had been* as helping verbs.

Past progressive perfect of regular verbs	singular	plural
first person	I had been walking	we had been walking
second person	you had been walking	you had been walking
third person	he, she, it had been walking	they had been walking

The *future progressive perfect* tense uses *will have been* as helping verbs.

Future progressive perfect of regular verbs	singular	plural
first person	I will have been walking	we will have been walking
second person	you will have been walking	you will have been walking
third person	he, she, it will have been walking	they will have been walking

Wow! That seems like a lot! Remember, though, that most of our tenses are formed with helping verbs. We don't have a lot of inflections to learn. We can conjugate, or show the inflections of our verbs, fairly easily.

Today I *walk*.
He *walks*.
Yesterday I *walked*.
I have *walked*.
I am *walking*.

Regular verbs have just four inflections.

walk, walks, walked, walking

On the other hand, there are the irregular verbs. Unfortunately, in every language, the most commonly used verbs are the ones most likely to be irregular. After all, the more anything is used, the more it is apt to change.

Most times we can count on the *-s* and *-ing* endings to be regular, so the only inflections we really need to pay attention to are the past and the past participle. If you look up a verb in most dictionaries, the entry will show any irregular inflections.

Today I bear a burden.
Yesterday I bore a burden.
I have borne a burden.

Today I bite the apple.
Yesterday I bit the apple.
I have bitten the apple.

Today I beat you at tennis.
Yesterday I beat you at tennis.
I have beaten you at tennis.

Today I bleed.
Yesterday I bled.
I have bled.

Today I begin the championship.
Yesterday I began the championship.
I have begun the championship.

Today I blow the horn.
Yesterday I blew the horn.
I have blown the horn.

Today I bend the rod.
Yesterday I bent the rod.
I have bent the rod.

Today I break the pencil.
Yesterday I broke the pencil.
I have broken the pencil.

Today I bid you come.
Yesterday I bade you come.
I have bidden you come.

Today I breed horses.
Yesterday I bred horses.
I have bred horses.

Today I bind the vine.
Yesterday I bound the vine.
I have bound the vine.

Today I bring a book.
Yesterday I brought a book.
I have brought a book.

Today I build a wall.
Yesterday I built a wall.
I have built a wall.

Today I buy a book.
Yesterday I bought a book.
I have bought a book.

Today I catch a ball.
Yesterday I caught a ball.
I have caught a ball.

Today I choose a teammate.
Yesterday I chose a teammate.
I have chosen a teammate.

Today I cling to a rope.
Yesterday I clung to a rope.
I have clung to a rope.

Today I come to school.
Yesterday I came to school.
I have come to school.

Today I dig in the dirt.
Yesterday I dug in the dirt.
I have dug in the dirt.

Today I dive in the pool.
Yesterday I dove in the pool.
I have dived in the pool.

Today I do.
Yesterday I did.
I have done.

Today I draw.
Yesterday I drew.
I have drawn.

Today I drink.
Yesterday I drank.
I have drunk.

Today I drive.
Yesterday I drove.
I have driven.

Today I eat.
Yesterday I ate.
I have eaten.

Today I fall.
Yesterday I fell.
I have fallen.

Today I feed the baby.
Yesterday I fed the baby.
I have fed the baby.

Today I feel sick.
Yesterday I felt sick.
I have felt sick.

Today I flee.
Yesterday I fled.
I have fled.

Today I fling the Koosh Ball.
Yesterday I flung the Koosh Ball.
I have flung the Koosh Ball.

Today I fly.
Yesterday I flew.
I have flown.

Today I forsake my friends.
Yesterday I forsook my friends.
I have forsaken my friends.

Today I freeze.
Yesterday I froze.
I have frozen.

Today I get ready.
Yesterday I got ready.
I have gotten ready.

Today I give a gift.
Yesterday I gave a gift.
I have given a gift.

Today I go to the store.
Yesterday I went to the store.
I have gone to the store.

Today I grind coffee.
Yesterday I ground coffee.
I have ground coffee.

Today I grow flowers.
Yesterday I grew flowers.
I have grown flowers.

Today I hang a picture.
Yesterday I hung a picture.
I have hung a picture.

To hang a person, is different, though:
The cowboys hanged the rustler.
Mobs have hanged innocent people.

Today I have a list of helping verbs.
I had a list of helping verbs.
I have had a list of helping verbs.

Today I hear.
Yesterday I heard.
I have heard.

Today I hide a ball.
Yesterday I hid a ball.
I have hidden a ball.

Today I hold a ball.
Yesterday I held a ball.
I have held a ball.

Today I keep a teammate.
Yesterday I kept a teammate.
I have kept a teammate.

Today I kneel in the dirt.
Yesterday I knelt in the dirt.
I have knelt in the dirt.

Today I know my helping verbs.
Yesterday I knew my helping verbs.
I have known my helping verbs.

Today I lay the book down.
Yesterday I laid the book down.
I have laid the book down.

Today I lead my friends to school.
Yesterday I led my friends to school.
I have led my friends to school.

Today I leave.
Yesterday I left.
I have left.

Today I lend money.
Yesterday I lent money.
I have lent money.

Today I lie down.
Yesterday I lay down.
I have lain down.

Today I light a candle.
Yesterday I lit a candle.
I have lit a candle.

Today I lose my way.
Yesterday I lost my way.
I have lost my way.

Today I make bread.
Yesterday I made bread.
I have made bread.

Today I mean what I say.
Yesterday I meant what I said.
I have meant what I have said.

Today I meet my friends.
Yesterday I met my friends.
I have met my friends.

Today I mow the grass.
Yesterday I mowed the grass.
I have mown the grass.

Today I pay for the book.
Yesterday I paid for the book.
I have paid for the book.

Today I plead for mercy.
Yesterday I pled for mercy.
I have pled for mercy.

Today I prove my hypothesis.
Yesterday I proved my hypothesis.
I have proven my hypothesis.

Today I ride a horse.
Yesterday I rode a horse.
I have ridden a horse.

Today I ring a bell.
Yesterday I rang a bell.
I have rung a bell.

Today I rise out of my seat.
Yesterday I rose out of my seat.
I have risen out of my seat.

Today I run.
Yesterday I ran.
I have run.

Today I say something.
Yesterday I said something.
I have said something.

Today I see a bird.
Yesterday I saw a bird.
I have seen a bird.

Today I seek my fortune.
Yesterday I sought my fortune.
I have sought my fortune.

Today I sell paintings.
Yesterday I sold paintings.
I have sold paintings.

Today I send a letter.
Yesterday I sent a letter.
I have sent a letter.

Today I sew a dress.
Yesterday I sewed a dress.
I have sewn a dress.

Today I shake with fear.
Yesterday I shook with fear.
I have shaken with fear.

Today I shear a sheep.
Yesterday I sheared a sheep.
I have shorn a sheep.

Today I shine a light.
Yesterday I shone a light.
I have shone a light.

Today I shoot a gun.
Yesterday I shot a gun.
I have shot a gun.

Today I show a book.
Yesterday I showed a book.
I have shown a book.

Today I shrink.
Yesterday I shrank.
I have shrunk.

Today I sing a song.
Yesterday I sang a song.
I have sung a song.

Today I sit.
Yesterday I sat.
I have sat.

Today I slay a dragon.
Yesterday I slew a dragon.
I have slain a dragon.

Today I sleep.
Yesterday I slept.
I have slept.

Today I slide down a rope.
Yesterday I slid down a rope.
I have slid down a rope.

Today I sling the newspaper.
Yesterday I slung the newspaper.
I have slung the newspaper.

Today I speak.
Yesterday I spoke.
I have spoken.

Today I speed down the road.
Yesterday I sped down the road.
I have sped down the road.

Today I spend money.
Yesterday I spent money.
I have spent money.

Today I spin the top.
Yesterday I spun the top.
I have spun the top.

Today I spit.
Yesterday I spat.
I have spat.

Today I spring up in the air.
Yesterday I sprang up in the air.
I have sprung up in the air.

Today I stand.
Yesterday I stood.
I have stood.

Today I steal.
Yesterday I stole.
I have stolen.

Today I stick the pin in the wall.
Yesterday I stuck the pin in the wall.
I have stuck the pin in the wall.

Today I sting.
Yesterday I stung.
I have stung.

Today I stink.
Yesterday I stank.
I have stunk.

Today I strew rose petals.
Yesterday I strewed rose petals.
I have strewn rose petals.

Today I stride down the street.
Yesterday I strode down the street.
I have stridden down the street.

Today I strike the ball.
Yesterday I struck the ball.
I have stricken the ball.

Today I string the guitar.
Yesterday I strung the guitar.
I have strung the guitar.

Today I strive to do well.
Yesterday I strove to do well.
I have striven to do well.

Today I swear to tell the truth.
Yesterday I swore to tell the truth.
I have sworn to tell the truth.

Today I sweep.
Yesterday I swept.
I have swept.

Today I swell with pride.
Yesterday I swelled with pride.
I have been swollen with pride.

Today I swim.
Yesterday I swam.
I have swum.

Today I swing from the trees.
Yesterday I swung from the trees.
I have swung from the trees.

Today I take my place.
Yesterday I took my place.
I have taken my place.

Today I teach.
Yesterday I taught.
I have taught.

Today I tear the paper.
Yesterday I tore the paper.
I have torn the paper.

Today I tell stories.
Yesterday I told stories.
I have told stories.

Today I think.
Yesterday I thought.
I have thought.

Today I throw a ball.
Yesterday I threw a ball.
I have thrown a ball.

Today I tread lightly.
Yesterday I trod lightly.
I have trodden lightly.

Today I wake up.
Yesterday I woke up.
I have woken up.

Today I wear new jeans.
Yesterday I wore new jeans.
I have worn new jeans.

Today I weave a tale.
Yesterday I wove a tale.
I have woven a tale.

Today I weep.
Yesterday I wept.
I have wept.

Today I win the game.
Yesterday I won the game.
I have won the game.

Today I wind the clock.
Yesterday I wound the clock.
I have wound the clock.

Today I wring my hands.
Yesterday I wrung my hands.
I have wrung my hands.

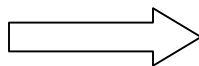
Today I write a letter.
Yesterday I wrote a letter.
I have written a letter.

Compound verbs follow the inflections of the original ending verb.

Today I *do*.

Yesterday I *did*.

I have *done*.



Today I *outdo* you.

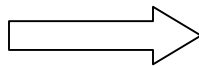
Yesterday I *outdid* you.

I have *outdone* you.

Today I *build* the wall.

Yesterday I *built* the wall.

I have *built* the wall.



Today I *rebuild* the wall.

Yesterday I *rebuilt* the wall.

I have *rebuilt* the wall.

awake

arise

become

befall

behold

forbid

forego

forget

forgive

foresee

foretell

interbreed

interweave

mishear

mislay

mislead

misread

mistake

outbid

outgrow

outrun

outsell

overcast

overcome

overdo

overdraw

overeas

overhear

overlay

overlie

overpay

override

overrun

oversee

oversell

overshoot

oversleep

overtake

overthrow

partake

preset

proofread

reawake

rebind

recast

redo

relay

remake

repay

rerun

resell

reset

rethink

reweave

rewind

rewrite

spoon-feed

unbind

underlie

understand

undertake

underwrite

undo

unwind

uphold

upset

withdraw

Some irregular verbs have no inflections at all. That is, they are identical in present, past, and past participle forms.

Today I *bet* my horse would win.

Yesterday I *bet* my horse would win.

I have *bet* my horse will win.

bet

bid

broadcast

browbeat

burst

cast

cost

cut

fit

forecast

hit

hurt

input

inset

knit

let

put

quit

read

rid

set

shed

shut

slit

split

spread

thrust

wed

wet



Active and Passive Voice

If the subject does the action of the verb, the sentence is in active voice.

If the subject with its noun, noun phrase, or pronoun is at the beginning of the sentence and the predicate with its verb or verb phrase follows, it's easy to see that the subject is doing the action.

The weary gardener took a break.

What is the action?	“Took” is the transitive verb.
Who or what did the taking?	“The weary gardener” is the noun phrase subject.
What directly received the action?	“A break” is the noun phrase direct object.

Without rest the gardener would make mistakes.

What is the action?	“Would make” is the transitive verb phrase.
Who or what did the taking?	“The gardener” is the noun phrase subject.
What directly received the action?	“Mistakes” is the direct object.

In an inverted sentence order—with a question for example—the sentence is still in active voice since the subject is still performing the action of the verb.

Did the gardener take a break?

To figure out the parts of the sentence, answer the question in the affirmative using the same words that are in the question.

(Yes) the gardener did take a break.

What is the action?	“Did take” is the transitive verb phrase.
Who or what did the taking?	“The gardener” is the noun phrase subject.
What directly received the action?	“A break” is the noun phrase direct object.

Even in a command using an understood subject, the sentence is still in active voice since the understood subject is still performing the action of the verb.

Take a break!
(You) take a break.

What is the action?	“Take” is the transitive verb.
Who or what did the taking?	“You” is the pronoun subject.
What directly received the action?	“A break” is the noun phrase direct object.

By using the passive voice it is possible to put the direct object at the beginning of the sentence and to hide the subject in a prepositional phrase. It's even possible to make the subject disappear entirely.

A break was taken by the weary gardener.

What is the action?

“Was taken” is the transitive verb phrase.

Who or what did the taking?

“The weary gardener” did the action but is hidden as the object of a preposition.

What directly received the action?

“A break” receives the action but looks like a subject.

A break was taken.

What is the action?

“Was taken” is the transitive verb phrase.

Who or what did the taking?

Nothing in the sentence tells who did the action.

What directly received the action?

“A break” receives the action but looks like a subject.

Passive sentences are much weaker than active sentences, so writing guides recommend that you use active voice and avoid the passive. However, if you want to admit that something went wrong without naming names, passive voice is the way to go.

Robert made mistakes.

Strong active voice, clearly accusing Robert.

Mistakes were made by Robert.

Weak passive voice, gently mentioning Robert's guilt

Mistakes were made.

Weak passive voice, no one singled out for blame



Misplaced Modifiers

Any modifier that isn't put where it is supposed to be in order to make the meaning of the sentence clear is called *misplaced*. If there is no noun or pronoun in the sentence that the modifier ought to modify, then the misplaced modifier is called a *dangling modifier*.

A participial phrase begins with a **verb** participle and ends with a **noun** or **pronoun** object. A participial phrase must be placed as close as possible to the noun or pronoun it modifies.

I was walking in the garden and saw the stone dragon come into view.

“I” is the subject followed by a compound verb “was walking” and “saw” and the direct object “the stone dragon.”

You can rewrite the sentence in a couple of ways to use a participial phrase.

Walking in the garden, I saw the stone dragon come into view.

The young couple walking in the garden saw the stone dragon come into view.

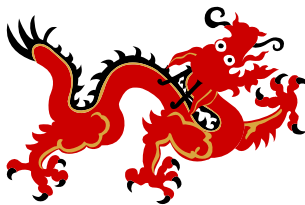
In the first sentence “I” was walking.

In the second sentence “the young couple” was walking.

If you take out the subject and its verb phrase, you create a dangling modifier.

Walking in the garden, the stone dragon came into view.

Who is doing the walking? The stone dragon! Watch out, or it will get you!



Because you know what you mean to say, you aren't likely to notice your own misplaced or dangling modifiers, which is one reason why it's such a good idea to have other people read your written work before you hand it in to a teacher—or a publisher.

Look for misplaced and dangling modifiers in newspapers, magazines, and books. Start a collection—use the examples to create and illustrate your own, private joke book of garbled grammar.



Lay vs. Lie

Ah, now we venture where angels fear to tread—the dreaded *lay vs. lie*.

Why bother? Who cares? No one understands or uses these [verbs](#) correctly, so why not just give up?

See, the problem is that there are other, related verbs, that follow the same inflections.

to overlay	transitive verb to lay over, to put something on, embellish
	She overlays a transparency of a current map over the old map. Yesterday she overlaid the transparency over the old map.
to overlie	transitive verb to lie over or on
	The decorator wanted several pillows and shams to overlie the master bedroom bedspread in the model home. Yesterday the pillows overlay the bedspread. The pillows have overlain the bedspread.
to mislay	transitive verb to lose
	He had a tendency to mislay his sunglasses. Yesterday he mislaid his sunglasses.
to re-lay	to replace old bricks or tiles with new
	They needed to re-lay the fireplace tiles. Yesterday they re-laid the fireplace tiles.

So, like it or not, it really does make sense to try to get a handle on *lay vs. lie*.

To lie means the same thing as to recline. Say it out loud, emphasizing the LIE sound in each. “To LIE is to recLIne.”



To lie, like to recline, is an intransitive verb. It never takes a direct object. You do not ever lie something down. Never! Never! Never!

I *lie* in the sun and soak up the rays.

Watching sitcoms and eating chips, he *lies* on the couch all afternoon.

The fallen tree trunk was *lying* over the stream.



On the other hand, to lay means the same thing as to put or to place. Say it out loud, emphasizing the LAY sound in each. “To LAY is to pLAcE.”



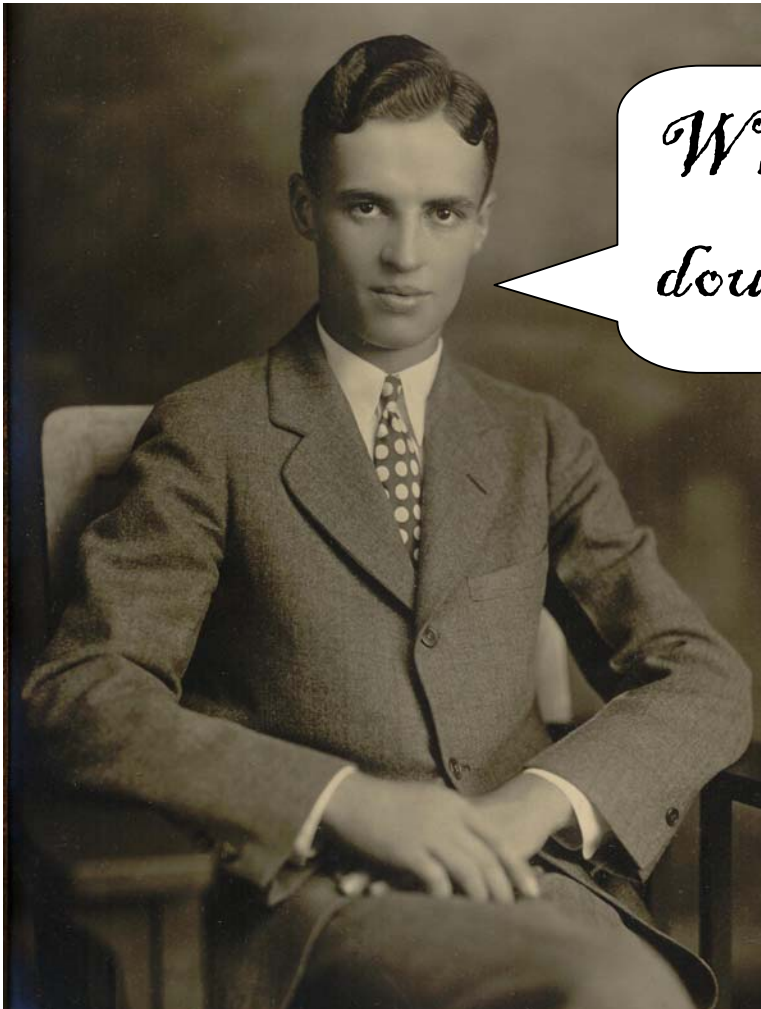
To lay, like to put or to place, is a transitive verb. It always takes a direct object. You always lay something down. Always, always, always!

I lay the towel on the deck and stretch out to sunbathe.

Wanting a can of pop, he lay the remote down on the floor and went to the refrigerator.

Starting a nest, the bird was laying bits of grass in a branch of the fallen tree.

Nine times out of ten, the word you want is *lie*. That fact leads to my favorite grammar rule of all time, taught to me by my grandfather, John H. Lewis, III.



*When in
doubt, lie.*

Then comes the really hard part. Both *lay* and *lie* are irregular verbs.

Today I lie in the sun.
Yesterday I lay in the sun.
I have lain in the sun.

Today I lay the book down.
Yesterday I laid the book down.
I have laid the book down.

The past tense of *lie* is the same as the present tense of *lay*. How ridiculous! How difficult! It is so hard to sort out—and so hard to remember!

“But you said English was easy!” I hear you cry.

No, I never said English was easy. Simple, yes, but not easy. (Physics, theology, grammar—any time you reduce a concept to its profoundly simple components, it can be very hard to grasp.)



A Verb Puzzle

See if you can properly punctuate this string of words into two sentences so that it all makes sense.

John where James had had had had had had had had had had had the teacher's approval.

If you scroll down, you will find the *perfect* answer. But try to solve it yourself before you look.

John, where James had had "had," had had "had had." "Had had" had had the teacher's approval.

(James wrote a sentence using "had." John wrote the sentence using "had had." The teacher said "had had" was correct.)



Strong Verbs

Read a short story by Ray Bradbury—any short story by Ray Bradbury. Write down every verb he uses to indicate who is speaking: *said, asked, answered*, and all the rest.

What percent of the time does he use the words *say, says, said*?

What percent of the time does he use other words?

What other words does he use?

What information does each of those words convey beyond the identity of the speaker?

List other strong verbs that he uses, verbs that convey detailed information in one word, verbs that paint a picture.

In four and a half pages of one story I found Bradbury used *said* eight out of 14 times, or about half the time. The six other verbs give a sense of action or emotion.

complained
ignored

asked
retorted

came back
laughed

If a good writer uses *said* only about half the time in writing dialogue, you should limit your use of the word *said* to about half the time, too. Learn to use other, stronger, verbs.

In the same four and a half pages of his story I found 52 other strong verbs. (And I may have missed a few!)

punched
circling
buzzing
colliding
crawls
flutters
crush
smash
annihilate
destroyed
ruled
advised
noted

dictate
froze
waved
twisted
patted
leaped
stared
ached
exploded
rapped
flung
bolted
searching

struck
crushed
cried
softened
hissing
tapped
insist
suspect
shielded
fluttering
flickering
wrenched
screamed

gabbling
wobbled
seized
breathing
phoned
detested
breeding
whirled
curtained
intermixed
dread
hummed
sizzled

Now read another short story by a more pedestrian writer. Make your two lists again, and figure out the percentage of *said* words in the second story. Compare both of your lists to the Bradbury lists. Notice a difference?

Good writers employ good, strong, vigorous words. Use a thesaurus, use a dictionary, use your imagination, get suggestions from friends. Work on improving your writing by broadening your vocabulary.



Participial Phrase Openings

One way to dress up your writing is to [vary your sentence openings](#), and an unusual way to open a sentence is with a participial phrase. You won't want to start every sentence with a participial phrase opening, it's true, but you might throw one in every page or two.

Beaming at her parents, Traci hugged her new puppy.
Wriggling from her arms, he slipped to the floor and jumped around her feet.
Receiving permission to take him for a walk, Traci put a leash and collar on him.
Showing him off to her friends, she announced, "I'm naming him Popcorn."
Realizing Popcorn had slipped out of his collar and was gone, she went home alone.
Searching the neighborhood, her father found Popcorn and returned him to Traci.
Keeping Popcorn in her room with her that night, Traci slept well.

Too much is definitely not a good thing! Use participial phrase openings like spice—a little adds flavor, but too much overwhelms.

Participial phrase openings require a comma.

Beware the [misplaced modifier](#). It's all too easy to make a participial phrase opening turn into a dangling modifier. Every time you use a participial phrase opening, double-check that the subject of the sentence comes right after the comma, and that the subject of the sentence is doing the action of the participle. Otherwise you get really funny sentences.

Beaming at her parents, her new puppy licked Traci.
(The *puppy* is the one beaming at Traci's parents).

Receiving permission to take him for a walk, her parents put a leash and collar on him.
(Her *parents* got permission to take him for a walk).

Announcing his name was Popcorn, all her friends thought he was so cute.
(Her *friends* got to name her dog!)

Searching the neighborhood, Popcorn was found and returned to Traci.
(*Popcorn* is the one searching—for himself!)



Adverb

An adverb is one [part of speech](#). An adverb modifies a [verb](#) (and [verbals](#)), an [adjective](#), or another adverb—that is, an adverb adds to the meaning or changes the meaning of the verb, adjective, or adverb.

If adjectives tell *which* noun or pronoun, adverbs tell [when](#), [where](#), or [how](#) an action was done.

Adverbs can modify by telling [how much](#) or how little, even to the point of changing a verb, adjective, or other adverb into its [opposite](#).

In addition to single words, adverbs can also be a [phrase](#) or a [clause](#).

Adverbs can be used to make [comparisons](#).

Show off your skill with adverbs by learning the difference between [further and farther](#) and by learning how to use [only](#) correctly.

Play with adverbs by creating [Tom Swifties](#).

Improve your writing by using an [adverb sentence openings](#) or an [adverb clause](#) opening.



Time Adverbs

One way an **adverb** can modify a **verb** is by telling *when* an action took place.

Ordinal numbers are the numbers we use to tell the order of things. We can use ordinal numbers as adverbs to tell when something was done in a chronology of events.

First he went to the starting blocks.

Second he waited for the signal.

Third he ran the race.

“He was the first” would make *first* a noun at the end of a noun phrase. “He was the first runner to cross the finish line” would make *first* an adjective within a noun phrase.

These time adverbs overlap with number pronouns, number nouns and number adjectives.

Some adverbs give calendar information or the day or the time of day.

We met *yesterday* *early* in the day.

We need to talk *now* about the meeting *today*.

We will meet *late* in the day *tomorrow*.

Sometimes it seems as if we were meeting *hourly*, even if it is only *daily*.

Some adverbs give a sense of time by telling how often something happens.

The national meetings are *often* held in coast towns

We try to attend *frequently*.

I *always* seem to meet others who attend *regularly*.

There are adverbs that tell time by indicating a simultaneous or nearly simultaneous event or idea. They also link two or more ideas, similar to conjunctions.

incidentally as a subordinate matter, added parenthetically

likewise in the same way

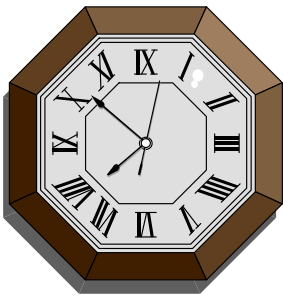
similarly

meanwhile at the same time

still for the present

There are other adverbs that tell time by indicating a later or subsequent event or idea. They also act in a way similar to conjunctions.

<i>also</i> <i>furthermore</i> <i>moreover</i>	in addition to, besides
<i>next</i> <i>then</i>	immediately following
<i>afterward</i> <i>later</i>	subsequently
<i>finally</i> <i>ultimately</i>	occurring at the end
<i>consequently</i> <i>hence</i> <i>therefore</i> <i>thus</i>	as a result of, following for the reason given
<i>however</i> <i>nevertheless</i> <i>nonetheless</i>	in spite of what has come before
<i>otherwise</i>	in different circumstances
<i>instead</i>	in place of something already mentioned



Many of these adverbs have more than one meaning, but the ones given for each group show how each can “tell time.”

You will often see these adverbs immediately following a semicolon or at the beginning of a sentence. In most cases they would be followed by a comma.



Place Adverbs

One way an **adverb** can modify a **verb** is by telling *where* an action took place.

I went *home* after last week's conference.

Next year I want to go *abroad* to the international meeting in Italy.

Some of the meals will be *outside*.

The presentations, though, will all be *inside*.

here

there

everywhere

nowhere

anywhere

somewhere

elsewhere

Spelling note! All the directional adverbs that build off the word *here* end in *here*.

here

there

everywhere

nowhere

anywhere

somewhere

elsewhere

On the other hand, the homophone *hear* ends in *-ear*.

After all, you hear with your ear.



Manner Adverbs

One way an **adverb** can modify a **verb** is by telling *how* an action took place.

Because these adverbs generally end in *-ly*, they are the most easily recognized and most familiar.

He ran down the stairs *quickly*.

At the lobby he stopped *abruptly* and turned toward the front desk.

Impatiently, he rang the bell and *eagerly* asked the clerk for any messages.

The clerk spoke *soothingly*, assuring him that he would be contacted if any came in.

There are several *-ly* adverbs that convey emotion or an element of chance. The old rule was that these adverbs were limited to modifying the verb: “He spoke hopefully about his chances of winning the race” tells the manner of his speaking. Now people regularly use these words to modify the sentence as a whole: “Hopefully, I will win the race.”

fortunately

happily

hopefully

interestingly

sadly



Degree Adverbs

One way an adverb can modify an adjective or another adverb is by indicating degree. In this case, the adverb tells how much or how little force to attribute to the adjective or adverb being modified.

Adverbs of degree often modify adverbs.

He ran down the stairs *really* quickly.

At the lobby he stopped *rather* abruptly and turned toward the front desk.

Somewhat impatiently, he rang the bell.

Too eagerly, he asked the clerk for any messages.

The clerk spoke *very* soothingly, assuring him that he would be contacted if any came in.

Each adverb of degree can modify an adjective.

He was *almost* afraid he would miss seeing an important client.

He was *so* afraid he would miss seeing an important client.

He was *quite* afraid he would miss seeing an important client.

He was *extremely* afraid he would miss seeing an important client.

In each case the adverb of degree modifies the adjective *afraid*.

Degree adverbs can also modify verbals.

Just being a competent salesman was not good *enough* for him.

He longed to succeed *spectacularly*.

Just modifies the verbal phrase “being a competent salesman.” *Enough* modifies the adjective “good.” *Spectacularly* modifies the verbal “to succeed.”



Negation Adverbs

One way an adverb can modify a [verb](#), [adjective](#), or another [adverb](#) is by negation. In this case, the adverb completely changes the meaning of the verb, adjective, or adverb to its opposite.

He was *never* afraid he would miss seeing an important client.

He was *not* afraid he would miss seeing an important client.

He *wasn't* afraid he would miss seeing an important client.



Adverb Phrases

Single words can be adverbs. In addition, a phrase can be an [adverb](#).

Many prepositional phrases do the job of adverbs. They are called [adverbial prepositional phrases](#). Sometimes the preposition is left out but understood.

He requested a wake-up call *for the morning*.

He waited (for) *a minute* to get the request confirmed.

Sometimes a couple of words are used together in a phrase that is not a prepositional phrase but still acts like an adverb.

He was *a little* afraid he would miss seeing an important client.

He was *kind of* afraid he would miss seeing an important client.

One reason for his anxiety was that he had forgotten an important appointment *last week*.



Comparisons

Like comparative adjectives, an adverb can be used to make comparisons.

Adverb comparisons are organized into three types: positive, comparative, and superlative. The positive just involves a statement using the adverb in its simple form.

I read *fast*.

The comparative involves a comparison between two things.

Some read *faster* than others.
(comparing one group—“some”—with another group—“others”)

He reads *faster* than I do.

The superlative involves a comparison among three or more things.

She reads the *fastest* of all my friends.

For short words use the *-er* and *-est* endings.

fast	slowly
faster	slower
fastest	slowest

For most adverbs use the words *more* and *most*.

quickly	rapidly
more quickly	more rapidly
most quickly	most rapidly

To go into opposite meanings, use the words *less* and *least* to form the comparative and superlative.

quickly	slowly
less quickly	less slowly
least quickly	least slowly

There are irregular comparative and superlative forms. As usual, the most commonly used words are the ones most apt to be irregular. Use a dictionary to check.

He writes *well*.
That author writes *better*.
He does *best*.

He writes *badly*.
That author writes *worse*.
He does *worst* of all.



Further vs. Farther

***Far* can be an [adjective](#) or an [adverb](#).**

I went a far way before I realized I was lost.
I traveled far—farther than I had intended.

One hundred years ago or more “I went a fer piece” meant “I went a long way” or “I went a far distance.” In those days the comparative and superlative forms of *far* could go either way.

far	far
farther	further
farthest	furthest

These days we make a distinction between *farther* and *further* and between *farthest* and *furthest*.

For distances that are physical or geographical or literal, we use *far*, *farther*, and *farthest*.

We traveled *far* on our trip to San Francisco.
We traveled *farther* on our vacation to Italy.
When we voyage to Ganymede, we will travel the *farthest* of all!

For distances that are mental or imaginary or metaphysical, we use *far*, *further*, and *furthest*.

The science fiction writer’s imagination went *far* beyond the norm.
His ideas went *further* into fanciful alternate worlds than most authors dared.
His creativity extended the *furthest* of any author I have read.

You will still see examples of the old usage hanging around. Be modern and up-to-date. Learn to divide the words and use them in the correct categories.



Only

Any modifier that isn't put where it is supposed to be in order to make the meaning of the sentence clear is called a [misplaced modifier](#).

Only is an [adverb](#) that is often misplaced. *Only* must be placed as close as possible to the word it modifies, generally directly in front of the word or phrase it modifies, or, with the judicious use of a comma or two, directly behind.

I, only, went once about 75 miles by bus to Rome.

I went only once about 75 miles by bus to Rome.

I went once only, going about 75 miles by bus to Rome.

I went once only about 75 miles by bus to Rome.

I went once about 75 miles, only by bus, to Rome.

I went once about 75 miles by bus only to Rome.

No one went with me.

I never went a second time.

I never went a second time.

The trip wasn't longer.

I didn't also take a car.

I didn't also go to Florence.



Tom Swifties

Victor Appleton wrote the Tom Swift science fiction-adventure series. I remember them because my brother had a bookcase full of the books back in the 1960s. To identify speakers in dialogue, Mr. Appleton usually just used the verb *said*, but then dressed it up a little by adding an **adverb**. Tom would say something *interestedly* or *curiously* or *excitedly*.

From that author's writing quirk came a word game using a type of pun called Tom Swifties. Puns are short, little jokes based on words that have more than one meaning.

Most Tom Swifties build the joke around an **adverb** modifying "Tom said." A few build the pun by using a different, stronger **verb** besides *said*.

1. brightly = cheerfully
bright = shining light

What would Tom say *brightly* that has to do with light?

"The lights are back on," said Tom brightly.

2. cheerfully = acting full of good spirits
Cheer = a laundry detergent

What would Tom say *cheerfully* that has to do with Cheer?

"I'm done with my Science Fair experiment! I now know which laundry detergent *really* works best," said Tom cheerfully.

3. tired = fatigued, worn out
tire = rubber tube on a car wheel

What would Tom say *tiredly* that has to do with a car tire?

"Oh, no, the spare is flat, too," said Tom tiredly.

4. meaningfully = in a way that indicates importance or significance
mean = nasty, cruel, bullying

What would Tom say *meaningfully* that has to do with being mean?

"Are you going to give me your lunch money or do I have to beat you up?" asked Tom meaningfully.

Some Tom Swifties from my Students

“All the balloons are filled up,” said Tom airily.

“I should have aced that quiz!” shouted Tom testily.

“I have plenty of garbage bags,” said Tom gladly.

“Yeah, well, I think you’re stupid,” said Tom dully.

“I didn’t want the plate to be *blue*,” said Tom sadly.

“I don’t like grapes,” Tom whined.

“That gas smells really stinky,” said Tom exhaustedly.

“Trip over that tree! Trip over that tree!” Tom rooted.

“The prairie is dry,” said Tom plainly.

“Look how big *his* boat is,” said Tom longingly.

“I like the movie where the town’s dam fills up with water and it breaks!” Tom burst out.



Adverb Openings

One way to dress up your writing is to [vary your sentence openings](#). One of the more common ways to open a sentence is with an [adverb](#). You won't want to start every sentence with an adverb opening.

Excitedly, Traci hugged her new puppy.
Suddenly, he wriggled from her arms and jumped around her feet.
Then Traci asked her parents if she could take him for a walk.
Patiently, she waited until they had put a leash and collar on him.
Proudly, she showed him off to her friends. "I'm naming him Popcorn," she announced.
Later she realized Popcorn had slipped out of his collar and was gone.
Dejectedly, she went home alone.
Quickly, her father went to search.
Triumphantly, he returned with Popcorn.
Contentedly, Traci kept Popcorn in her room with her that night.
Finally, they both slept well.

Too much is definitely not a good thing! Still, you ought to throw adverb openings into your writing every now and again. You will probably use more than one a page.

Some adverb openings make good transitions to keep the reader aware of order or chronology.

first
second
third
then
next
last
finally

Use transition adverb openings as needed but avoid repeating them. "First we did this. Then we did this. Then we did this. Next we did this." Using repeated transition adverb openings make you sound like a breathless preschooler prattling on and on and on about what happened that day. We call that "shopping list" writing. It's boring!

Just remember to use other adverb openings, too, including the *-ly* adverbs.

Transition adverb openings often don't use a comma, but other adverb openings usually require a comma.



Conjunction

A conjunction is one part of speech.

There are two types of conjunctions, correlative and subordinating.

Have fun with alternate ways of writing a series of words or phrases.

Improve your writing by using subordinating conjunctions to create adverb clause openings.



Coordinating and Correlative Conjunctions

One type of **conjunction** is the **coordinating conjunction**. A coordinating conjunction connects two or more things of equal weight in the sentence.

Some coordinating conjunctions are used to connect words, phrases, or clauses.

and	I like <u>berries</u> <i>and</i> <u>grapes</u> .
but	“ <u>An apple a day keeps the doctor away</u> ” is a proverb, <i>but</i> “ <u>a day without orange juice is like a day without sunshine</u> ” is an advertising slogan.
or	<u>Fresh fruits</u> <i>or</i> <u>raw vegetables</u> make nutritious snacks.
nor	<u>I don’t like melons</u> , <i>nor</i> <u>do I like cauliflower</u> .

Some coordinating conjunctions are generally used just to connect independent clauses.

for	<u>I try to eat five servings of fruits and vegetables a day</u> , <i>for</i> <u>it is recommended by health experts</u> .
yet	<u>I do try</u> , <i>yet</i> <u>I admit I don’t always succeed</u> .
so	<u>It’s worth the effort</u> <i>so</i> <u>I can have a longer, healthier life</u> .

Correlative conjunctions are used in pairs. They can connect words, phrases, or independent clauses.

either . . . or	<i>Either</i> <u>eat fruits</u> <i>or</i> <u>eat vegetables</u> .
neither . . . nor	To get the maximum benefits, <i>neither</i> <u>fruits</u> <i>nor</i> <u>vegetables</u> should be cooked.
not only . . . but also	<i>Not only</i> <u>should adults feed children a healthy diet</u> , <i>but</i> <u>adults should also model good eating habits for children</u> .
both . . . and	<i>Both</i> <u>adults</u> <i>and</i> <u>children</u> benefit from eating well.



Conjunctions in Series

One way to use **conjunctions** is to connect a series of three or more words, phrases, or clauses.

As a general rule, separate items in a series by commas. Even though some books will say the comma is optional before the last item in a series, I still recommend that you make a habit of using one there. That last comma becomes especially helpful if the last item in the series is a phrase or is itself a compound.

During our trip to New Orleans, my sister and I ate dinner at Antoine's where we had asparagus soup, chicken cordon bleu, and cherries jubilee.

For breakfast at the Court of Two Sisters we had trout, eggs Benedict on artichoke hearts, and fresh strawberries and cream.

On the way home we ate at Denny's where we were offered several choices: eggs scrambled or over easy, bacon or sausage, hash browns or grits, biscuit or toast, and coffee or tea.

You can also join a series of phrases or clauses with semicolons, although that's becoming less common. You will most often see that construction in a list following a colon.

Denny's offers several choices on their breakfast menu: eggs scrambled, fried, or over easy; bacon, ham, or sausage; hash browns or grits; biscuit, muffins, or toast; and juice, coffee, or tea.

With more and more writing done on the computer, business writers sometimes use bullets instead of semicolons for longer and more awkward lists.

Denny's offers several choices on their breakfast menu:

- eggs scrambled, fried, or over easy
- bacon, ham, or sausage
- hash browns or grits
- biscuit, muffins, or toast
- juice, coffee, or tea

There are a couple of other ways to handle a series. It may be that you don't want to list everything, but you want to indicate that the list is incomplete. Don't follow a partial list with *etc.* Simply drop the conjunction at the end of the series.

We sampled the food at Antoine's, the Court of Two Sisters, and Hoolihan's.

We sampled the food at Antoine's, the Court of Two Sisters, Hoolihan's.

In the first case we went to three restaurants. In the second we went to more restaurants but only named three.

Occasionally—very occasionally—you may want to emphasize every word in a series, to draw out the list, to slow the reader down. In that case you can drop all the commas and use the conjunction repeatedly.

On the way home we ate at Denny's, reminiscing about our trip while we lingered over scrambled eggs and sausage and hash browns and biscuits and coffee and juice.

As long as you don't overuse them, these last two alternate ways to write a series can add punch to your writing.



Subordinating Conjunctions and Adverb Clauses

If something is subordinate, it has a lower rank or standing, or it is under the authority or control of another.

One type of conjunction is the subordinating conjunction. A subordinating conjunction connects a dependent adverb clause to an independent clause in a sentence.

Any independent clause may be transformed into a dependent adverb clause simply by adding a subordinating conjunction in front of the clause. Any dependent clause left standing by itself, unattached to an independent clause, becomes a fragment.

The reason your teacher told you not to start a sentence with *because* is because students often fail to attach the dependent adverb clause to an independent clause. Your teacher wanted you to write in complete sentences, not fragments.

In reality, it's perfectly acceptable to start a sentence with *because* as long as you follow the dependent adverb clause with an independent clause—one that *doesn't* start with a subordinating conjunction.

Dependent clauses may be at the beginning or end of the sentence, or they may interrupt the independent clause.

after	before	since	until
although	even though	so that	when
as . . . as	how	though	whether
because	if	unless	while

Because fresh fruits or raw vegetables are so nutritious, we encourage students to bring them for morning snacks.

We encourage students to bring fresh fruits or raw vegetables for morning snacks because they are so nutritious.

Although I like berries and grapes, I don't get to eat them much in the winter.

I don't get to eat berries and grapes much in the winter although I like them best.

While "an apple a day keeps the doctor away" is a proverb, "a day without orange juice is like a day without sunshine" is an advertising slogan.

"An apple a day keeps the doctor away" is a proverb while "a day without orange juice is like a day without sunshine" is an advertising slogan.

Although I don't like melons or cauliflower, I buy them for my husband.

I don't like melons or cauliflower although my husband does.

If you begin a sentence with a dependent adverb clause, add a comma before going on to the independent clause.

Though my brother tries to eat five servings of fruits and vegetables a day, he doesn't always succeed.

A dependent adverb clause, if it interrupts an independent clause, needs to have commas surrounding it.

My brother, though he tries to eat five servings of fruits and vegetables a day, doesn't always succeed.

No comma is needed if the dependent adverb clause is at the end of the sentence.

My brother tries to eat five servings of fruits and vegetables a day though he doesn't always succeed.



Adverb Clause Openings

One way to dress up your writing is to vary your sentence openings. One of the more common ways to open a sentence is with an adverb clause opening. Use a subordinating conjunction to make an adverb clause, then use the adverb clause at the beginning of a sentence.

You won't want to start every sentence with an adverb clause opening.

After her father got home, Traci got her birthday present—a new puppy.

As soon as she picked him up to hug him, he wriggled from her arms and jumped around her feet.

Though Traci wanted take him for a walk right away, she waited until her parents had put a leash and collar on him.

Because he was bouncing around so much, she decided to name him Popcorn.

While she was showing him off to her friends, Popcorn slipped out of his collar and disappeared.

Even though she tried hard to find him, she finally gave up and went home to get help.

Since his daughter was heartbroken, and since it was her birthday, her father vowed to find Popcorn.

Until he returned with her puppy, he would continue to search.

If she had lost him forever, she didn't know what she would do.

Before Traci had finished getting ready for bed, her father returned with Popcorn.

How he managed to find the little dog, Traci never thought to ask him.

If she could kept Popcorn in her room with her that night, she wouldn't worry any more.

So that their daughter could sleep well, her parents gave their permission.

Too much is definitely not a good thing! Still, you ought to throw adverb clause openings into your writing pretty regularly. You will probably use more than one a page. Work to expand your repertoire beyond the use of the most common subordinating conjunction *when*.



Interjection

An interjection is one part of speech. It usually expresses emotion or feeling. It can be abrupt or emphatic. It can be a word or phrase.

An interjection can stand alone as a rudimentary sentence, often punctuated with an exclamation point. It can be interjected into a sentence, in which case it is often surrounded by commas.

Some interjections are used more in speech than in formal writing. You might include them in the dialogue passages but not in the narrative sections of a story. For example, interjections include slang, profanities, obscenities, and vulgarities. (Profanities have to do with religion, obscenities with sex, and vulgarities with bodily functions. Obscene and vulgar interjections can be responsible for movies getting rated for “harsh language.”)

ah	hey	ow	tsk
alas	hi	pardon me	ugh
bye	hmm	phew	uh
cool	huh	please	uh-huh
dear	ick	right	uh-oh
dear me	no	so long	um
er	nope	sorry	well
excuse me	oh	sure	wow
fine	oh dear	thanks	yeah
goodbye	okay	thank you	yes
hello	ouch	thanks a lot	yuk

“*Hey!* Watch where you’re going!”

“*Sorry,* didn’t mean to run into you.”

“*Ouch!*”

“*Uh-oh,* did I step on your foot?”

“*Yeah.*”

“I really didn’t mean to. *Man,* this subway is crowded!”



Complete Subject

How do you dissect a sentence? How do you pick it apart and analyze it? How do you reduce it to its parts? How do you understand the relationships between the parts?

A sentence has two main parts, the subject and the predicate.

Most sentences begin by announcing what they are about. They start with the subject.

To find the subject, ask yourself some questions:

- Who or what is being talked about?
- Who or what is doing the action of the verb?
- Or, in the case of a verb of being or a linking verb, who or what *is* or *becomes* or *appears* or *seems*?

The subject may be a noun or a pronoun; it may be a single word, a noun phrase, or a noun clause.

This pool seems cold.

It is awfully crowded in spite of the chilly water.

Look! *Ronda* is going to dive!

She is so good.

To dive like that takes practice.

I wish that I had the guts to do flips off the high dive the way she does.

The rest of the kids in line have to wait until she is out of the way.

Whoever dives next has a hard act to follow!

If the subject is part of a contraction, it may be a little more obscure.

Brr! *I'm* too cold to stand here and watch any more.

There may be more than one subject joined with a coordinating or correlative conjunction, forming a compound subject.

The Jacuzzi or a hot shower sounds good right about now.

You and I should get into the Jacuzzi to warm up.

Tiff, Tina, and Trace are there already.

The subject may disappear entirely. If the sentence is giving an order—an imperative or a command—the subject may not be overtly expressed. We say it is “understood.”

Come here.

(*You* come here).

Join us.

(*You* join us).

The subject may not be at the beginning of a sentence in a question or other inverted form. To check that you found the subject, rewrite the sentence in normal order.

Did *you* see what Tyler did? (You did see what Tyler did).
In the water is *his favorite place to be*. (His favorite place to be is in the water).

If there is an alternative sentence opening, the subject will not be at the beginning of the sentence.

Normally, *Tyler* prefers swan dives and jackknife dives.
Challenged by Ronda's dive, *he* did a double flip today!
For a twelve-year-old, *that* is pretty impressive.
After he got out of the water, *Jeff* followed him with a cannonball.

Sometimes the word *it* or *there* is used at the beginning of the sentence as a kind of place holder for a long subject that comes after the verb. You could rewrite the sentences to put the subjects in front, but they would sound more stilted. Still, rewriting the sentences lets you see clearly that the words *there* and *it* don't really have a job other than letting you know that a subject is coming up later.

There is a real need for children *to learn safety around the diving boards*.
(*To learn safety around the diving boards* is a real need for children.)

It is important *that life guards are on duty*.
(*That life guards are on duty* is important.)



Simple Subject

The complete subject may be a noun or a pronoun; it may be a single word, a noun phrase, or a noun clause. The simple subject is the noun or pronoun in the complete subject without its modifiers.

This *pool* seems cold.

It is awfully crowded in spite of the chilly water.

Look! *Ronda* is going to dive!

She is so good.

To dive like that takes practice.

I wish that I had the guts to do flips off the high dive the way she does.

The *rest* of the kids in line have to wait until she is out of the way.

The *Jacuzzi* or a hot *shower* sounds good right about now.

You and *I* should get into the Jacuzzi to warm up.

Tiff, *Tina*, and *Trace* are there already.



Complete Predicate

A sentence has two main parts, the subject and the predicate.

The complete predicate includes the verb or verb phrase—intransitive, transitive, or linking. It also includes any complements—direct objects, predicate nominatives, or predicate adjectives. And it includes any modifiers for the verbs or complements.

To find the predicate, look for the verb. Ask yourself, what is the action in the sentence? Or, if you cannot find an action verb, look for the verbs you memorized: linking verbs or helping verbs.

This pool seems cold.
It is awfully crowded in spite of the chilly water.
Look! Ronda is going to dive!
She is so good.
To dive like that takes practice.
I wish that I had the guts to do flips off the high dive the way she does.
The rest of the kids in line have to wait until she is out of the way.
Whoever dives next has a hard act to follow!

If the verb is part of a contraction, it may be a little more obscure.

Brr! I'm too cold to stand here and watch any more.

There may be more than one predicate joined with a coordinating or correlative conjunction, forming a compound predicate.

We should hit the showers or get into the Jacuzzi to warm up.
Our friends are done swimming and want to go home.

Even if the subject disappears in an imperative sentence, the verb is still there, giving a command.

<i>Come here.</i>	<i>(You come here).</i>
<i>Join us.</i>	<i>(You join us).</i>

The predicate may be split up in a question. To check that you found the predicate, rewrite the sentence in normal order.

<i>Did you see what Tyler did?</i>	<i>(You did see what Tyler did).</i>
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Simple Predicate

The **complete predicate** includes the verb or verb phrase, any complements, and any modifiers for the verbs or complements.

The simple predicate is the verb or verb phrase within the complete predicate.

This pool *seems* cold.
It *is* awfully crowded in spite of the chilly water.
Look! Ronda *is going to dive!*
She *is* so good.
To dive like that *takes* practice.
I *wish* that I had the guts to do flips off the high dive the way she does.
The rest of the kids in line *have to wait* until she is out of the way.
Whoever dives next *has* a hard act to follow!
Brr! I'm too cold to stand here and watch any more.

We *should hit* the showers or *get* into the Jacuzzi to warm up.
Our friends *are done* swimming and *want* to go home.

OK, I am open to some discussion here. To me, “is going to dive” sounds like a single action, a variation on “will dive,” so I am including the infinitive as part of the simple predicate. It’s the same idea with “have to wait,” which sounds like a variation on “must wait.”

In contrast, “our friends . . . want to go home” sounds like they want *something*, which makes “to go home” a **verbal** used as a direct object.

Even if the subject disappears in an imperative sentence, the verb is still there, giving a command.

Come here. (You *come* here).
Join us. (You *join* us).

The verb may be split up in a question. To check that you found the verb, rewrite the sentence in normal order.

Did you *see* what Tyler did? (You *did see* what Tyler did).



Direct Object

A sentence has two main parts, the subject and the predicate.

The complete predicate may include a transitive verb with a direct object. Without a transitive verb there cannot be a direct object!

The direct object may be a noun or a pronoun; it may be a single word, a noun phrase, or a noun clause.

To find the direct object, first ask yourself, is the verb an action verb? If it is, then look for an object that directly receives the action of the verb. Ask yourself, what object had the action done to it? Who or what directly received the action of the verb?

I rocked the cradle.	action = rocked	direct object = cradle
The child left his bed.	action = left	direct object = bed
Birds chanted songs.	action = chanted	direct object = songs
I heard the notes.	action = heard	direct object = notes
The flock revisited the scene.	action = revisited	direct object = scene
I threw myself on the sand.	action = threw	direct object = myself
I sing a reminiscence.	action = sing	direct object = reminiscence

There may be more than one direct object joined with a coordinating or correlative conjunction, forming a compound direct object.

I recited a *poem* and a *story*.



Indirect Object

A sentence has two main parts, the subject and the predicate.

The complete predicate may include a transitive verb with a direct object.

If there is a direct object, there may also be an indirect object. Without a direct object there cannot be an indirect object!

The indirect object may be a noun or a pronoun; it may be a single word, a noun phrase, or a noun clause.

To find the indirect object, first ask yourself, is the verb an action verb? If it is, then look for an object that directly receives the action of the verb. If there is a direct object, then ask yourself, is there some object that received the direct object? Who or what got the person or thing that was the object of the verb?

The child gave his sister a book.	action = gave	direct object = a book indirect object = his sister
I threw Andy the towel.	action = threw	direct object = the towel indirect object = Andy

To double-check that you have the indirect objects right, use a preposition to put them into a prepositional phrase.

The child gave a book to his sister.	action = gave	direct object = a book prepositional phrase = to his sister
I threw the towel to Andy.	action = threw	direct object = the towel prepositional phrase = to Andy

If you misidentify an indirect object as a direct object, the mental picture you create can be silly.

The child gave his sister a book.	If sister is the direct object, then the child gave <i>her</i> . <i>She</i> got given. The next question is, who did the child give her to?
I threw Andy the towel.	If Andy is the direct object, then I threw <i>him</i> . <i>Andy</i> got thrown. The next question is, am I strong enough to pick Andy up, let alone throw him? (And why would Andy let me throw him, anyway?)

Predicate Nominative

A sentence has two main parts, the subject and the predicate.

The complete predicate may include a linking verb and a predicate nominative. Without a linking verb there cannot be a predicate nominative!

The predicate nominative may be a noun or a pronoun; it may be a single word, a noun phrase, or a noun clause.

A predicate nominative names in the predicate the same person or thing that was named in the subject.

To find the predicate nominative, first ask yourself, is the verb a linking verb? If it is, then look for a noun or pronoun in the predicate that renames the subject. Can you turn the linking verb into an equal sign to show the relationship between the subject and the predicate nominative?

I am a <i>gardener</i> .	I	=	gardener
We are <i>friends</i> .	we	=	friends
They were <i>helpers</i> .	they	=	helpers
He is being the <i>mower</i> .	he	=	mower
He had been a <i>DJ</i> for three years.	he	=	DJ

There may be more than one predicate nominative joined with a coordinating or correlative conjunction, forming a compound predicate nominative.

I am a neighbor and her friend.	I	=	neighbor
	I	=	friend



Predicate Adjective

A sentence has two main parts, the subject and the predicate.

The complete predicate may include a linking verb and a predicate adjective. Without a linking verb there cannot be a predicate adjective!

The predicate adjective is, as you might expect, an adjective.

A predicate adjective is an adjective in the predicate that describes the person or thing that was named in the subject.

To find the predicate adjective, first ask yourself, is the verb a linking verb? If it is, then look for an adjective in the predicate that describes the subject. Can you rewrite the subject using the adjective as a modifier?

She is <i>helpful</i> .	the helpful girl
He was <i>hard-working</i> .	the hard-working boy
You will be <i>educated</i> .	the educated student
She has been <i>energetic</i> .	the energetic woman
The roses appeared <i>wilted</i> .	the wilted roses
The dahlias looked <i>beautiful</i> .	the beautiful dahlias
The garden seemed <i>well-tended</i> .	the well-tended garden
The daisies smelled <i>awful</i> .	the awful-smelling daisies
The fountain sounded <i>pleasant</i> .	the pleasant-sounding fountain
The berries tasted <i>sweet</i> .	the sweet berries
The sun felt <i>warm</i> .	the warm sun
I become (or get or grow) <i>tired</i> .	the tired gardener
I remain (or stay) <i>steadfast</i> .	the steadfast worker

There may be more than one predicate adjective joined with a coordinating or correlative conjunction, forming a compound predicate adjective.

She certainly seems *happy* and *excited*! the happy, excited bride



Independent Clause

Let's back up a minute here. A word is the basic unit of verbal communication. There are other, non verbal ways to communicate: a look, a gesture, a touch, the clothes we choose to wear, the way we adorn or decorate our bodies. But for verbal communication we use words.

Each word can be classified as to its part of speech, depending on how it is used.

The shovel is in the shed.	shovel = noun (object)
I am going to shovel dirt.	shovel = verb (action)
The shovel blade on the snowplow is huge.	shovel = adjective (tells which)
I will plant bulbs first.	first = adverb (tells when)
The first to come up are the crocuses.	first = noun (objects)
The purple crocuses are the first ones to fade.	first = adjective (tells which)

Phrases are groups of words that work together to do the job of one part of speech.

[noun phrase](#)

[adjective phrase](#)

[prepositional phrase](#)

[verb phrase](#)

[adverb phrase](#)

[participial phrase](#)

Even though a clause is also a group of words that works together to do a job, it is distinct from a phrase. A clause is more complex. It must have both a subject and a predicate.

An independent clause can stand by itself as a sentence.

The shovel is in the shed.
I am going to shovel dirt.
I will plant bulbs first.
The first to come up are the crocuses.
The purple crocuses are the first ones to fade.



Dependent Clause

A clause is more complex than a phrase. It must have both a subject and a predicate.

A dependent clause cannot stand by itself as a sentence. It must be attached to an independent clause.

It is easy to turn independent clauses into dependent ones by changing the subject to *who*, *which*, or *that* to make an adjective clause or by adding a subordinating conjunction to make an adverb clause.

which is in the shed	adjective clause
before I go out to shovel dirt	adverb clause
as soon as I plant the bulbs	adverb clause
that come up are the crocuses	adjective clause

It is also possible to turn an independent clause into a dependent noun clause by adding *that* in front of the sentence.

that the purple crocuses are the first ones to fade	noun clause
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Dependent clauses that are left unattached are incomplete sentences. They are fragments.



Fragment

Using fragments is a common [sentence](#) error.

A complete sentence has a [subject](#) and a [predicate](#). A [dependent clause](#) must be attached to an [independent clause](#). Any incomplete sentence or dependent clause that is punctuated to look like a sentence is a fragment.

A subject by itself is a fragment.

The hot-dogging snowboarder, the wild man of the slopes.

“Snowboarder” is the simple subject, “the wild man of the slopes” is an appositive. There is no verb, no predicate—nothing to tell us what the snowboarder did. This is not a complete sentence.

A predicate by itself is a fragment.

Man, went zipping by like he was rocket-fueled.

“Man” is an interjection. “Went” is the simple predicate. There is no subject—nothing to tell us who went zipping. This is not a complete sentence.

A phrase by itself is a fragment.

On the mountain top.

The sample is a prepositional phrase, not a complete sentence.

A dependent clause by itself is a fragment.

Because he loved speed more than control.

“He” is the subject. “Loved” is the simple predicate. Yet this is not a complete sentence. “He loved speed more than control” is a complete sentence, but there’s that little word “because” in front.

“Because” is a [subordinating conjunction](#). By putting a subordinating conjunction in front of a perfectly good independent clause, it is transformed into a dependent adverb clause. The complete sentence becomes a fragment, a piece of a sentence, looking for a real, live independent clause to hook onto.

Short fragments can be used very occasionally for literary effect, but in most cases you should avoid them. If you don’t handle them well, they make your writing look pretty incompetent.



Run-On

Using run-ons is a common sentence error.

Two or more independent clauses may be kept separate.

The hot-dogging snowboarder, the wild man of the slopes, tore down the face of the black diamond hill.

Man, he went zipping by like he was rocket-fueled.

We stood on the mountain top to watch him race.

Because he loved speed more than control, he spent more time in the hospital last season than he did on the slopes.

Two or more independent clauses may be joined with a comma and a coordinating or correlative conjunction.

The hot-dogging snowboarder, the wild man of the slopes, tore down the face of the black diamond hill, *and*, man, he went zipping by like he was rocket-fueled.

We loved to stand on the mountain top to watch him race, *but* because he loved speed more than control, he spent more time in the hospital last season than he did on the slopes.

Two or more independent clauses may be joined with a semicolon.

The hot-dogging snowboarder, the wild man of the slopes, tore down the face of the black diamond hill; he went zipping by like he was rocket-fueled.

Unfortunately, he loved speed more than control; he spent more time in the hospital last season than he did on the slopes.

If two or more independent clauses are joined with just a comma or just a coordinating or correlative conjunction, they become a run-on.

The hot-dogging snowboarder, the wild man of the slopes, tore down the face of the black diamond hill *and*, man, he went zipping by like he was rocket-fueled *and* we loved to stand on the mountain top to watch him race *but* because he loved speed more than control, he spent more time in the hospital last season than he did on the slopes.

The hot-dogging snowboarder, the wild man of the slopes, tore down the face of the black diamond hill, he went zipping by like he was rocket-fueled.

We loved to stand on the mountain top to watch him race, because he loved speed more than control, he spent more time in the hospital last season than he did on the slopes.

Using run-ons can be effective in dialogue if you want to give the impression of breathless enthusiasm—rather like a second grader excitedly retelling the plot of a favorite movie. Otherwise, avoid them. After all, you don't want to sound like a breathless second grader, do you?



Subject-Intransitive Verb Sentence

One type of sentence includes a subject and a predicate with an intransitive verb.

The subject may be a noun or a pronoun; it may be a single word, a noun phrase, or a noun clause.

The intransitive verb in the predicate may be an action verb or a verb of being; it may be a single word or a verb phrase.

Any part of the sentence may include word, phrase, or clause modifiers.

With multiple modifiers, a subject-intransitive verb sentence can be very long.

In spite of our hard work, our training, our dedication, and our desire to succeed, despite our best efforts and perseverance, being now faced with insurmountable odds and certain defeat as well as the threat of imminent thunderstorms, we reluctantly must quit.

As a result of your incredible luck at being well ahead in points at the moment that the weather closed in, and due to our incredible sportsmanship and graciousness in deciding to concede, you win, at least for today.

Revitalized and refreshed after rest and renewed practice, we will, in the very near future, be back here again to face you on the tournament grounds, to continue our perennial battle for the title of champion.

Don't get too wordy just because you can! One of the advantages of the subject-intransitive verb sentence is that it can be very short. And a short sentence can pack a lot of punch.

We quit.
You win.
We'll be back.

A subject-intransitive verb sentence takes no complements: no direct object, no predicate nominative, and no predicate adjective. Complements *are* used in the other three types of sentences.



Subject-Transitive Verb-Direct Object Sentence

One type of sentence includes a subject and a predicate with a transitive verb and a direct object.

The subject may be a noun or a pronoun; it may be a single word, a noun phrase, or a noun clause. In the same way, the direct object may be a noun or a pronoun; it may be a single word, a noun phrase, or a noun clause.

The transitive verb in the predicate will be an action verb; it may be single word or a verb phrase.

Any part of the sentence may include word, phrase, or clause modifiers.

A subject-transitive verb-direct object sentence may be very short and simple.

I rocked the cradle.
The child left his bed.
Birds chanted songs.
I heard the notes.
The flock revisited the scene.
I threw myself on the sand.
I sing a reminiscence.

A subject-transitive verb-direct object sentence may be longer, with modifiers at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of the sentence.

I rocked the cradle throughout the night, late in September.
At dawn the child left his bed.
From patches of briars and blackberries birds chanted songs to me.
Standing under the yellow half-moon I heard the notes.
The flock, twittering, rising, passing overhead, revisited the scene.
I threw myself on the sand, confronting the waves.
I, one who chants of pains and joys, sing a reminiscence.

A subject-transitive verb-direct object sentence may be incredibly long. Walt Whitman's poem "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" starts with a single subject-transitive verb-direct object sentence that is a page long.

Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,
Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle,
Out of the Ninth-month midnight,
Over the sterile sands and the fields beyond, where the child
leaving his bed wander'd alone, bareheaded, barefoot,
Down from the shower'd halo,
Up from the mystic play of shadows twining and twisting as if they
were alive,
Out from the patches of briars and blackberries,
From the memories of the bird that chanted to me,
From your memories sad brother, from the fitful risings and fallings
I heard,
From under that yellow half-moon late-risen and swollen as if with
tears,
From those beginning notes of yearning and love there in the mist,
From the thousand responses of my heart never to cease,
From the myriad thence-arous'd words,
From the word stronger and more delicious than any,
From such as now they start the scene revisiting,
As a flock, twittering, rising, or overhead passing,
Borne hither, ere all eludes me, hurriedly,
A man, yet by these tears a little boy again,
Throwing myself on the sand, confronting the waves,
I, chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter,
Taking all hints to use them, but swiftly leaping beyond them,
A reminiscence sing.

OK, it's an old poem, published in 1891, and it doesn't follow normal word order, so it might be hard to understand, much less find the simple subject-transitive verb-direct object. The sentence starts with multiple prepositional phrases and an adverb clause opening, then goes to the main clause, which is interrupted by even more modifiers.

A man, yet by these tears a little boy again,
Throwing myself on the sand, confronting the waves,
I, chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter,
Taking all hints to use them, but swiftly leaping beyond them,
A reminiscence sing.

The subject is "a man," which has several appositives: I, chanter, uniter.
The transitive verb is "sing."
The direct object is "a reminiscence."



Subject-Linking Verb-Predicate Nominative Sentence

One type of sentence includes a subject and a predicate with a linking verb and a predicate nominative.

The subject may be a noun or a pronoun; it may be a single word, a noun phrase, or a noun clause. In the same way, the predicate nominative may be a noun or a pronoun; it may be a single word, a noun phrase, or a noun clause.

The verb in the predicate will be a linking verb; it may be single word or a verb phrase.

Any part of the sentence may include word, phrase, or clause modifiers.

A subject-linking verb-predicate nominative sentence may be very short and simple.

Walt Whitman was a poet.

He was an American.

That he knew what he was doing is a fact.

One poem was “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.”

The anthology is *Leaves of Grass*.

A subject-linking verb-predicate nominative sentence may be longer, with modifiers at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of the sentence.

Born in the 1800s, Walt Whitman was an American poet.

That he knew what he was doing in manipulating the language is a fact one cannot deny.

One famous poem he wrote was “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.”

The anthology that the poem appeared in is *Leaves of Grass*.

“That he knew what he was doing in manipulating the language” is a noun clause subject. It is being equated with “a fact.” You may, of course, disagree with the assertion. What is your opinion?



Subject-Linking Verb-Predicate Adjective Sentence

One type of sentence includes a subject and a predicate with a linking verb and a predicate adjective.

The subject may be a noun or a pronoun; it may be a single word, a noun phrase, or a noun clause.

The verb in the predicate will be a linking verb; it may be single word or a verb phrase.

As you might expect, the predicate adjective will be an adjective; it may be a single word or an adjective clause.

Any part of the sentence may include word, phrase, or clause modifiers.

A subject-linking verb-predicate adjective sentence may be very short and simple.

Walt Whitman was creative.
He was American.
That he knew what he was doing is clear.
“Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” is long.
Leaves of Grass is available.

A subject-linking verb-predicate adjective sentence may be longer, with modifiers at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of the sentence.

Walt Whitman, a famous American poet, was creative.
That he knew what he was doing is abundantly clear.
Among his most famous poems, “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” is very long.
Leaves of Grass is available in book stores and on-line.

“That he knew what he was doing” is a noun clause subject. To see how the predicate adjective works to modify this particular subject, change it to an adjective clause; think of it as saying “the fact that he knew what he was doing is abundantly clear.” Now it should be easy to see that “clear” modifies the subject—“the fact is clear” or “the clear fact.” It’s abundantly clear, right?



Simple Sentence

The least complex type of sentence includes a single independent clause and no dependent clauses.

A simple sentence may be any of the four types. Individual parts of the sentence may be compound: the subject, the predicate, or a complement. Any part of the sentence may have word or phrase modifiers.

Subject-Intransitive Verb

Colleen went out for a drive in her mother's car.
She drove all over town and looked for a car for herself.

Subject-Transitive Verb-Direct Object

She bought a used Dodge Dart.
She knew how to work on the slant-6 engine.

Subject-Linking Verb-Predicate Nominative

The Dart was a classic.
Colleen was a careful comparison shopper and a good negotiator.

Subject-Linking Verb-Predicate Adjective

The final price was good.
The insurance wasn't too expensive.



Compound Sentence

A more complex type of sentence includes more than one independent clause and no dependent clauses.

Two independent clauses may be joined by a comma with a coordinating or correlative conjunction.

Colleen got in her mother's car, and she drove all over town to look for a car for herself.

She knew how to work on a slant-6 engine, so she bought a used Dodge Dart.

Colleen was a careful comparison shopper, and she was a good negotiator.

The final price was good, but the classic car insurance was a little expensive.

Two independent clauses may be joined with a semicolon.

Colleen got in her mother's car; she drove all over town to look for a car for herself.

She knew how to work on a slant-6 engine; she bought a used Dodge Dart.

Colleen was a careful comparison shopper; she was a good negotiator.

The final price was good; the classic car insurance was a little expensive.

More clauses may be joined in a series, either with commas and a conjunction or with semicolons.

Colleen got in her mother's car, she drove all over town looking for a car for herself, and she found the perfect one.

She had taken auto mechanics, she knew how to work on a slant-6 engine, and she knew how reliable the car was, so she bought a used Dodge Dart.

Colleen was a careful shopper; she compared deals; she was a good negotiator.

Even though joining a series of independent clauses with semicolons is allowed, it's becoming less common.

As a general rule, you won't want to use a semicolon very often.



Complex Sentence

Another more complex type of sentence includes a single independent clause and at least one dependent clause.

The dependent clause may be an adjective clause.

Colleen went out for a drive in her mother's car, *which she often got to borrow*.
She drove all over town and looked for a car *that she could call her own*.

The dependent clause may be an adverb clause.

Since she knew how to work on the slant-6 engine, she bought a used Dodge Dart.
Even though the final price was good, the insurance was a little expensive.

The dependent clause may be a noun clause.

That the Dart was a classic was a bonus point for Colleen.

Whatever her parents had taught her about being a good comparison shopper and negotiator stood her in good stead now.



Compound-Complex Sentence

The most complex type of sentence includes more than one independent clause and at least one dependent clause.

The dependent clause may be an adjective clause.

Colleen went out for a drive in her mother's car, *which she often got to borrow*, and she drove all over town looking for a car *that she could call her own*.

The dependent clause may be an adverb clause.

Since she knew how to work on the slant-6 engine, she bought a used Dodge Dart, and she had them throw on new tires, too.

Even though the final price was good, the insurance was a little expensive, and she had to borrow a little from her mom for the first payment.

The dependent clause may be a noun clause.

That the Dart was a classic was a bonus point for Colleen, so she was thrilled with her first car purchase.

Whatever her parents had taught her about being a good comparison shopper and negotiator had stood her in good stead, and she bragged to her friends about the good deal she got.



Vary Sentence Lengths

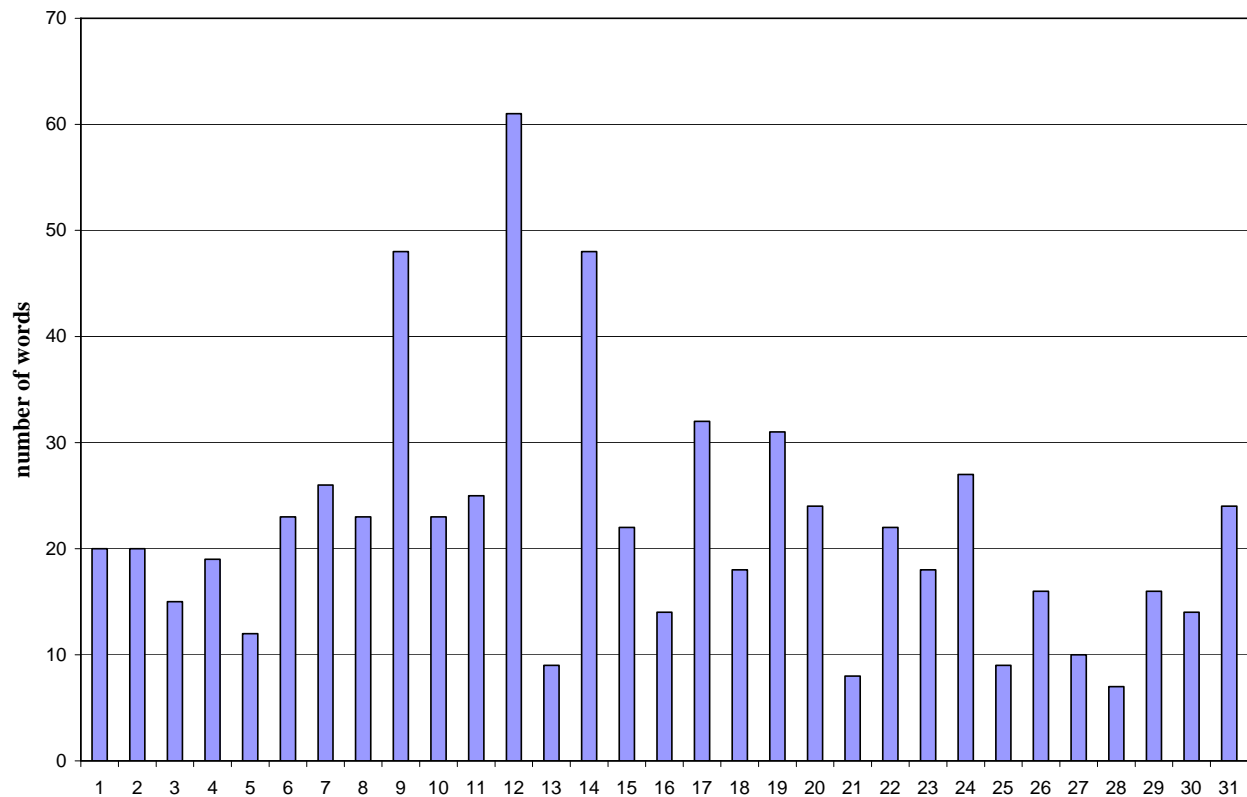
Learn to vary the length of your [sentences](#).

Make some sentences short.	10 words or less
Make some sentences medium-length.	10-25 words
Make some sentences long.	more than 25 words

For even more punch, put really short sentences next to really long ones.

Read the first few pages of *Tom Sawyer* or *Alice in Wonderland*. Count the number of words in each sentence and make a bar graph to show the distribution of sentence length. Pay attention to how great writers accomplish so much by using such a simple device.

Comparing Sentence Lengths in the Beginning of *The Phantom Tollbooth*





Vary Sentence Types

The vast majority of the sentences you write will be subject-transitive verb-direct object. In order to give your writing variety, to give it sparkle and zest, to make it sing, you must break out of the common lock-step cadence:

SUBJECT
VERB
DIRECT OBJECT

SUBJECT
VERB
DIRECT OBJECT

SUBJECT
VERB
DIRECT OBJECT

Use other types of sentences and different levels of sentence complexity.

Subject-Linking Verb-Predicate Nominative

Monday was Traci's birthday.

Subject-Transitive Verb-Direct Object

She wanted to open her presents before supper.

Subject-Intransitive Verb

She waited impatiently.

Subject-Linking Verb-Predicate Adjective

She was so excited.

Simple Sentence

Finally her father came home.

Compound Sentence

Her parents made her eat, and then they brought out some gifts.

Complex Sentence

After she opened several boxes, Traci thought she was all done.

Compound-Complex Sentence

Her parents smiled at each other, and they went out to the garage to get the last present, which they thought would be the best of all.



Vary Sentence Openings

You will also want to vary the way you begin your [sentences](#). Starting your sentences in different ways will make them less boring. It will help you catch and keep the attention of your readers.

[adjective openings](#)

[adverb openings](#)

[participial phrase openings](#)

[prepositional phrase openings](#)

[adverb clause openings](#)

For her birthday Traci got a new puppy. As soon as she picked him up, he wriggled from her arms and jumped around her feet. Excited, Traci asked her parents if she could take him for a walk. She waited until they had put a leash and collar on him before she took him out the door.

Proudly, she showed him off to her friends. “I’m naming him Popcorn,” she announced, “because he’s so bouncy.”

While she was talking about her other gifts, Popcorn slipped out of his collar and ran off down the street. Near tears, Traci went home alone.

Her father searched the neighborhood, found Popcorn, and brought him home. How he managed to find the little dog, Traci never thought to ask him. She just thanked him profusely and hugged her little dog.

Keeping Popcorn in her room with her that night, Traci slept well.

So did Popcorn.

Please notice that you will still start some of your sentences with a subject and a verb. Just don’t start all of them that way! Learn to mix it up a little.



Other Stylistic Devices

You have so many tools at your disposal now, from [varying sentence type](#) or [length](#), to using alternate [sentence openings](#), to adding the occasional [appositive](#) or [nominative absolute](#).

There are a few more tools I would like to see you add to your repertoire. Some of them will fit in better with fiction writing rather than nonfiction, so make sure you add these in at appropriate times and places.

SIMILE

You make a simile when you take two things that are not alike and use them to draw a connection using the words *like* or *as*.

There are lots of similes that are clichés. Everyone knows them, they are predictable, and they are boring. Don't use clichés.

He was little, like a mouse.
She was as brave as a lion.

Make up your own similes that are fresh.

He felt like a candle blown out in the wind.
—Ray Bradbury

The joy that could find no words expressed itself in broken accents, like the bubbles gushing up to vanish at the surface of a deep fountain.
—Nathaniel Hawthorne

The kid's hair looked like it had exploded.
—Zak, grade 7

METAPHOR

You make a metaphor when you take two things that are not alike and use them to draw a connection without using the words *like* or *as*.

What everybody echoes or in silence passes by as true today may turn out to be falsehood tomorrow, mere smoke of opinion.

—Henry David Thoreau

A whale ship was my Yale College and my Harvard.

—Herman Melville

Sarah was afraid that her imagination was morphing from a house pet to a wild wolf, pulling her along in a ridiculous reality.

—Olivia, grade 6

Using a simile or metaphor now and then makes the reader think and see in new ways. It demonstrates your thoughtfulness and creativity.

HYPERBOLE

Hyperbole is exaggeration for effect. It's not true, and everyone knows it's not true, but it may convey some ideas that are true.

I'm that same Davy Crockett, fresh from the backwoods, half-horse, half-alligator, a little touched with the snapping turtle, can wade the Mississippi, leap the Ohio, ride upon a streak of lightning, and slip without a scratch down a honey locust.

—Davy Crockett

But when the white man had warmed himself before the Indian's fire and filled himself with Indian corn, he became very big. He walked across the mountains at a single step, and his feet filled the plains and valleys. His hands reached out and held the seas to the east and the seas to the west, and his head rested on the moon.

—Chief Speckled Snake

For some reason, all her stuff always seemed to fly to random parts of the house.

—Miranda, grade 7

You won't use hyperbole as often as some literary devices, but it's nice to know it's there is you want it.

PERSONIFICATION

Any time you take an animal or object and make it act or speak as if it were human, you are using personification.

Dere's no hidin' place down dere,
Dere's no hidin' place down dere,
Oh I went to de rock to hide my face,
De rock cried out, "No hidin' place,
Dere's no hidin' place down dere."

—Negro spiritual

ALLITERATION

Starting two or more words with the same sounds makes for alliteration.

Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.

Janet Kragen wrote *Decade Days*, *Staying Sane in the Classroom*, and *Elementary English*.

Be careful. Alliteration can be overdone. A little goes a long way.

ONOMATOPOEIA

Some words are designed to sound like the sound they name. Those words are examples of onomatopoeia, a term which comes from two Greek words meaning "to make" and "a name."

Squeak. Squeal. Plop. Splat. Buzz. Hiss. Bang. Crash. Squawk.

Onomatopoeia can make your writing sound more real.

IMAGERY

Draw on your senses to bring the reader into your setting.

What do you see?

What do you hear?

What do you smell?

What do you taste?

What do you touch?

Use several senses, not just sight, to build a complete and satisfying mental picture.