

Subjects, Verbs, And Prepositions

One of the most important goals for reading and writing is establishing subjects. The subject of a book is the cumulative subjects of each chapter; the subject of a chapter is the cumulative subjects of each paragraph; the subject of a paragraph is the cumulative subject of each sentence. Unfortunately, many of us have been taught an inefficacious way of determining subjects. In order to find the subject of a sentence, you must find the verb first. Why? A sentence's subject is NOT defined as what the sentence is about, but rather who/what is acting on the verb.

Almost every sentence has a **subject** and **verb**. The most important part of a sentence and probably the *most important* part of speech is the VERB.

Whether you're trying to write an effective sentence or interpret one, think first about verbs. Whenever possible, resist the temptation to rely on the verb *to be* (see below) because it tends *to be* imprecise.

Verbs

Verbs are about action or being.

Examples of **action verbs**: smash, talk, eat, mumble, groan, steal, ask

Shakespeare **wrote** many plays. [*wrote*=an action]

Examples of the **verb to be**: am, is, are, was, were, has been, have been, had been

My father **was** an affectionate man. [*was*=a being verb]

Reading Tip

If you're having trouble interpreting a sentence, find VERBS first. If you find the verb, you can more easily find the subject. If you identify subject and verb, you have the main idea of a sentence.

Verbs in Disguise

In football, normally the quarterback receives the snap, and then either hands off or passes. Sometimes, however, the quarterback chooses to run the ball himself or even to block or receive a pass. He's still the quarterback, but in those other cases, he's functioning like a running back, blocker, or receiver. Verbs are versatile, like quarterbacks. Verbs function in various ways, acting as **nouns** and **adjectives**, and sometimes as the **subject** of a sentence. When you read and write, ask whether these disguised verbs describe nouns (in which case they're acting as adjectives) or if they're pretending to be nouns themselves. See the examples below, which feature chameleon-like verbs.

Example: I parked the car. [*parked* functions as a conventional verb]

Example: Parking is difficult. [verb (*Parking*) functions as a noun and the subject of the verb *is*]

Example: The driver crashed into a parked car. [*parked* functions as an adjective, modifying the noun *car*]

EXERCISE on Identifying Verbs

Directions: Circle the letter that corresponds to the list that has **verbs** only. Then identify a word from the other list that is NOT a verb.

1. Which list contains **verbs** only? Circle the letter that corresponds to your choice.

- (a) sip, stab, is, are, am, had, grumble, grab
- (b) sip, stab, is, was, golden, car, bold, filthy

2. Identify at least one word that is *NOT* a verb in 1a or 1b. _____

3. Which list contains **verbs** only? Circle the letter that corresponds to your choice.

- (a) crawl, step, were, weigh, feel, need, look, throw
- (b) am, normally, steer, yesterday, want, ferocious, old, orange

4. Identify at least one word that is *NOT* a verb in 3a or 3b. _____

5. Which list contains **verbs** only? Circle the letter that corresponds to your choice.

- (a) under, near, by, with, for, to, bathe, women
- (b) go, take, reject, accept, understand, ignore

6. Identify at least one word that is *NOT* a verb in 5a or 5b. _____

7. Which list contains **verbs** only? Circle the letter that corresponds to your choice.

- (a) gargle, rinse, spit, spray, gush, cleanse
- (b) slowly, carefully, defiantly, definitely

8. Identify at least one word that is *NOT* a verb in 7a or 7b. _____

9. Add at least two writing-related verbs to the following list, and feel free to consult a thesaurus if you'd like: scribble, write, _____

10. Add at least two speaking-related verbs to the following list, and feel free to consult a thesaurus if you'd like: tell, relate, _____

Subjects

Every sentence has a **subject**, which is **what the sentence is about**. Without a subject, a sentence is usually incomplete—a **fragment** and it's likely going to be unclear.

A sentence's subject can be a person, place, thing, action, verb, noun—almost anything you can think of. Since the subject of a sentence is often a person, place, or thing, and since we know that people, places, and things are classified as **nouns**, we tend to think, **mistakenly**, that any noun we find is the subject. NOT every noun is the subject.

The subject is what the sentence is about—the main idea—but in grammatical terms, the subject is **who/what acts on the verb**. If you can find the verb, you can find the subject. If you know the subject and verb, you understand the core of the sentence, which is crucial for reading comprehension and analyzing your writing. The grammatical subject and verb are the main idea of a sentence.

How to Find the Subject

(1) First find the verb. (2) Then ask *Who/what is acting on the verb? Who/what is verbing?*

Example: Shakespeare **wrote** many plays.

1. *wrote*=a verb 2. who/what wrote? *Shakespeare* 3. *Shakespeare*=the subject zzzzz

* Trouble Spot

Some parts of speech, such as prepositional phrases, seem like subjects, but they aren't. Some students confuse prepositional phrases with subjects.

* Reminder

Sentences can have more than one subject and verb.

EXERCISE on Subjects and Verbs in Context

Directions: Circle the best answer.

1. Group work is more enjoyable than individual work.
 - A. *work* is the verb; *group* is the subject of *work*
 - B. *is* is the verb; *individual* is the subject of *is*
 - C. *is* is the verb; *group work* is the subject of *is*

2. When I work in groups, I talk incessantly.
- incessantly* is the verb; *groups* is the subject of *incessantly*
 - work* is the verb; *talk* is the subject of *work*
 - work and talk* are the verbs; *I* is the subject of *work* and *talk*
3. My untrained dog piddles in the house and barks loudly, but my friend's poodle is house trained and never barks.
- untrained* is the verb; *dog* and *poodle* are the subjects of *never*
 - dog* is the subject of the verbs *piddles* and *barks*; *poodle* is the subject of the verbs *is* and *barks*
 - house, poodle* and *dog* are subjects; *untrained* and *loudly* are verbs
4. Although I usually don't eat sweets, tonight I gorged on chocolate bars, brownies, and butterscotch pudding.
- I* is the subject of the verbs *eat* and *gorged*
 - Chocolate bars, brownies, and butterscotch pudding* are the subjects; *sweets* is the verb
 - There is only one verb in this sentence: *eat*
5. During the summer, Irfan and Marcha traveled to Trinidad, but Julie and Stashanna stayed at home.
- summer* is the subject; *traveled* is the verb
 - Irfan and Marcha* are the subjects of the verb *traveled*
 - traveled* and *stayed* are verbs; *Trinidad* is the subject
6. Eating smoked sausage makes me ill.
- sausage* is the subject; *smoked* is the verb
 - me* is the subject; *makes* is the verb
 - Eating* is a verb acting as a noun and the subject of the verb *makes*; *smoked* is also a verb, and it's acting as an adjective describing the noun *sausage*
7. Studying the night before an exam is crucial for success.
- before* is the verb; *night* is the subject
 - Studying* is the verb; *night* is the subject
 - Studying* is a verb acting as a noun and as the subject of the verb *is*
8. Do you see the poor man on the corner?
- you* is the subject; *see* is the verb
 - man* is the subject; *do* is the verb
 - corner* is the subject; *see* is the verb
9. Using a thesaurus will help you with vocabulary and precision.
- you* is the subject of the verb *will help*

B. *Using* is a verb functioning as a noun and as the subject of the verb *will help*

C. *thesaurus* and *you* are subjects; *precision* and *help* are verbs

10. My favorite part of speech is the verb; my mother's favorite part of speech is the adjective.

A. *My* and *speech* are subjects; *verb* and *part* are verbs

B. *part* and *verb* are subjects; *speech* is a verb

C. *part* is the subject; *is* is a verb

EXERCISE on More Subjects & Verbs

Directions: In the space below each sentence, identify subjects and verbs. There might be more than one subject and verb in each sentence.

Example: I snuggle with my puppy.

Verb: snuggle Subject: I

1. I drove my car too fast.

Verb(s): _____

Subject(s): _____

2. She is pretty.

Verb(s): _____

Subject(s): _____

3. Spencer studies every night, even when he is exhausted.

Verb(s): _____

Subject(s): _____

4. Arguing in front of children causes them a great deal of pain.

Verb(s): _____

Subject(s): _____

*** Trouble Spot**

In most sentences, the subject comes BEFORE the verb. However, some sentences, especially those with prepositional phrases and sentences that begin with "here" or "there" might violate the rule about the subject preceding verb.

5. After I chugged three glasses of water, I belched loudly.

Verb(s): _____ Subject(s): _____

6. She laughed, cried, and then screamed when she heard the miraculous news.

Verb(s): _____ Subject(s): _____

7. I knew him for only one year, but the professor was a friend and a mentor.

Verb(s): _____ Subject(s): _____

8. Nothing smells better than percolating coffee in the morning.

Verb(s): _____ Subject(s): _____

9. There is a softshell turtle at the bottom of the pond.

Verb(s): _____ Subject(s): _____

10. All this time Sancho had been on the hill, watching his master's follies, tearing his beard and cursing.

Verb(s): _____ Subject(s): _____

*Write a sentence that *begins with a verb*. Identify the subject(s) and verb(s).

Verb(s): _____ Subject(s): _____

Prepositions

Prepositions usually appear **before** a noun or pronoun, establishing a relationship between nouns, pronouns, and other parts of the sentence. Often short words that indicate direction or location, prepositions must be memorized in order to be recognized. One of many very annoying and inconsistent aspects of grammar is that we classify some concepts by function (verbs, for example, indicate action/being), but we do not classify others, such as articles (a, an, the) and prepositions that way.

Some very **common prepositions**: *at, by, from, in, of, on, to, and with.*

More Prepositions

about, above, across, after, against, ahead of, along, alongside, amid, among, as, before, behind, below, beneath, beside, between, despite, during, following, for, inside, near, next, off, onto, out, outside, over, past, through, throughout, toward, under, until, up, upon, within, without

A **PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE** is comprised of a preposition and its object. The object of a preposition is a noun or a pronoun.

Preposition (in) + Object (the water) = Prepositional Phrase (in the water)

Note that a prepositional phrase can contain articles or adjectives.

Example: for the old lady. For = preposition, the = article, old = adjective, and lady = noun

Since the object of a preposition is a noun or a pronoun, writers occasionally confuse the object of the preposition with the subject of a sentence. **The subject of a sentence is NEVER in the prepositional phrase.**

Be aware that sentences can have back-to-back prepositional phrases.

Example: You'll find the keys in the kitchen on the counter near the refrigerator.

The preposition *to* + verb is **NOT** a prepositional phrase. This construction is merely the infinitive form of the verb.

- to eat
- to drink

If you want to improve on **reading comprehension**, add **variety** to your sentences, and reduce the chance that you'll make a subject-verb agreement error, make sure you can identify prepositional phrases. It's a good idea to *begin some sentences with prepositional phrases* in order to emphasize key ideas and create **sentence variety**.

EXERCISE on Identifying Prepositions

1. Which list contains **prepositions** only? Circle the letter that corresponds to your choice.

- (a) with, for, by, near, under, to, toss, slowly, uncle
- (b) at, before, of, until, over, past, throughout, during

2. Identify at least one word that is *NOT* a preposition in a or b. _____

3. Which list contains **prepositions** only? Circle the letter that corresponds to your choice.

- (a) ahead, during, off, prior, upon, through, along, toward, at
- (b) across, like, press, inside, down, against, solemn, potato, door

4. Identify at least one word that is *not* a preposition in a or b. _____

5. Using the preposition table at the beginning of this section and your knowledge of parts of sentences (nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.), create a list of five words like those in questions 1 and 3. Some of the words should be prepositions, but some shouldn't.

- A. _____
- B. _____
- C. _____
- D. _____
- E. _____

F. Identify at least one word from 5 A-E that is *NOT* a preposition. _____

6. Is a prepositional phrase ever going to contain the subject of a sentence? _____

7. A prepositional phrase has two main parts: _____ and _____

8. The object of a preposition is usually a _____ or a _____

9. In the space provided, write the words that are NOT part of the prepositional phrases.

- A. snow on the ground _____
- B. soaring high above the earth _____
- C. drove with Owen and Anna _____
- D. played near the pear tree _____

10. Write a sentence that begins with a prepositional phrase.

EXERCISE on Distinguishing Prepositional Phrases, Subjects, and Verbs

Directions: Strike through the prepositional phrases in the following sentences. Then identify the subjects and verbs in the space below each sentence.

1. A large portion of the proceeds will be allocated for food and clothing.
Verb(s): _____ Subject(s): _____

2. On Saturday, I'm going to the mall with Rick and John.
Verb(s): _____ Subject(s): _____

3. The stains on the lampshade were produced by a cigarette that you left in the ashtray.
Verb(s): _____ Subject(s): _____

4. During the summer, the beach is enjoyable.
Verb(s): _____ Subject(s): _____

Remember

Sometimes an **adjective** will precede the noun or pronoun in the prepositional phrase as in the following example: *with my broken hand*. The prepositional phrase includes all words between the preposition and the noun/pronoun that comes at the end of the prepositional phrase. For more on adjectives, see section 1.5.

5. In the kitchen, on the counter near the microwave, you'll find the keys alongside the cookie jar.
Verb(s): _____ Subject(s): _____

6. In the evening, I like to drink lemonade and to eat strawberries.
Verb(s): _____ Subject(s): _____

7. My brother, along with two of his annoying friends, went with me to the mall on Friday to buy Nikes.
Verb(s): _____ Subject(s): _____

8. Across the street from my house lives Boo Radley, a reclusive fellow.
Verb(s): _____ Subject(s): _____

9. Upon the brimming water among the stones are nine and fifty swans.
Verb(s): _____ Subject(s): _____

10. The brutal nurse stuck the needle into the wrong vein, so blood flowed from my arm while she again jabbed the needle beneath my skin.

Verb(s): _____ Subject(s): _____

EXERCISE on Identifying Subjects, Verbs, & Prepositions

Directions: Circle the letter that corresponds to the best answer.

1. Near my house you'll find a waste management facility. You'll smell it too.

- A. The sentence begins with a prepositional phrase
- B. *my house* is the subject of the sentence

2. Blowing in the wind is the answer.

- A. *the wind* is the object of the preposition
- B. The sentence begins with a form of the verb to be

3. He was living just enough for the city.

- A. *for the city* is a prepositional phrase
- B. *He* is a verb

4. Are you a lucky little lady in the city of light, or just another lost angel?

- A. The sentence begins with a form of the verb to be
- B. The sentence does NOT have back-to-back prepositional phrases

5. I am the king of rock—there is none higher.

- A. The subject of the sentence is *rock*
- B. *rock* is part of the prepositional phrase, so it can't be the subject

6. Out here in the fields, I fight for my meals.

- A. *fields* and *meals* are subjects
- B. *fields* and *meals* are objects of prepositions, so they can't be subjects

7. Your plans have come to naught, and your life is half a page of scribbled lines.

- A. The sentence ends with a prepositional phrase
- B. *scribbled lines* is the subject of the sentence

8. The mass of people lead lives of quiet desperation.

- A. *people* is the subject of the sentence

B. *lead* is a verb

9. I get by with a little help from my friends.

A. *I* is the subject of the sentence

B. *my friends* is the subject of the sentence

10. After skiing, my girlfriend and I sip hot chocolate near the fire.

A. *fire* is the subject of the sentence

B. *my girlfriend* and *I* are the subjects of the sentence