



Sentence Patterns I: Locating Subjects and Verbs

Understanding the functions of subjects and verbs is an integral part of crafting coherent and grammatically correct sentences. Knowing how to spot those subjects and verbs is the first step to understanding how sentences are constructed.

Clauses

A clause is comprised of a least one subject and one verb. There are two types of clauses: the *independent* clause and the *dependent* clause.

Independent Clause

An independent clause makes a statement or asks a question that can act as a complete sentence.

Example: Peter dances.

Dependent Clause

A *dependent* clause cannot act as a complete sentence because it begins with a subordinating word, such as *when*, *because*, *if*, *whoever*, etc.

Example: When Peter dances.

All grammatically correct sentences have at least one independent clause, and, therefore, they have at least one subject and one verb.

Recognizing Subjects and Verbs

Verbs There are two types of verbs: action verbs and linking verbs.

Action verbs show us what is happening in a sentence.

*Example: The waves **crashed** on the beach.*

Linking verbs connect subjects with their descriptions.

*Example: My turtle **is** slow.*

Because verbs are often the most action-packed part of a sentence, they are easily recognizable.

Subjects Subjects are most often nouns and pronouns. They tell us who or what is performing an action or being described.

Posing the Question, Finding the Subject

Once you have recognized the verb, you can ask yourself a simple question to find the subject. If you have identified an action verb, ask, “Who or what is performing this action?” If you have identified a linking verb, ask, “Who or what is being described?” The answer to your question is the subject.

Example: *The waves **crashed** on the beach.*

Question: Who or what is *crashing*?

Answer: *the waves*, and, therefore, *the waves* is the subject

Example: *My turtle **is** slow.*

Question: Who or what is being described as *slow*?

Answer: *my turtle*, and, therefore, *my turtle* is the subject



Sentence Patterns

Once you understand the basics of sentence construction, you can create sentences of varying length and structure. However, no matter the length or structure of your sentence, the word order you use will rarely change, and understanding the standard word order of English sentences will help you distinguish subjects and verbs. What do you notice about word order in the example sentences below?

I flew my kite.

Mount Rainier towers over other mountains in the Cascade Range.

Frida Kahlo is arguably the most lauded female Surrealist painter of the 20th century.

Large groups of archaeologists flock to Pylos, Greece each summer to continue their search for ancient artifacts.

Ivan Illich lambastes compulsory public education in his monumental work, *Deschooling Society*.

You've no doubt noticed that the subject always comes before the verb, and that the subject is contained the first half of the sentence. Also, you may have noticed that the verb tends to occur in the middle of the sentence. Any extra information about the subject, including when, where, or why the action is taking place, is placed after the verb.

Exercise

Consider the following sentences. In each sentence, circle the verb and underline the subject. Also note the word pattern of each of these sentences.

Congress passed the Homestead Act in 1862.

Maya Angelou recalls her formative years in her memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

In 1873, Heinrich Schliemann excavated the ancient city of Troy in Turkey.

The bacteria grew exponentially.

Because of the roaring applause, Marcia performed an encore.

Mountain-climbing is excellent exercise.

Though the Berlin Wall was dismantled in 1989, East and West Germany remained economically disparate for years after.

The bookstore closed early on Sunday due to the hurricane.

The art of origami involves intricate paper-folding techniques.

The *RMS Titanic* sank into frigid Atlantic waters on April 14, 1912.