

Punctuation Handout 1, Syntax, Grammar, & Units of Meaning

Laying the Groundwork

The study of modern punctuation is largely based on an understanding of syntax – the arrangement of words, phrases, and clauses into appropriately-formed sentences. Grammar provides a vocabulary to describe and understand the principles of English syntax, and thus we must become familiar with at least the rudiments of rule-based grammar. There are eight principal parts of speech: nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, interjections. Definitions of these principal parts define grammatical function at the **word** level.

We must also understand the function of words (and groups of words) at the **sentence** level. We must be able to identify parts of a sentence: subjects, predicates, objects, complements, phrases, independent clauses, and dependent clauses.

A Subject is a noun, pronoun, or *noun group* about which something is said.

A predicate is the part of the sentence that makes a statement about the subject; the *predicate* will contain a verb.

Objects & Complements, usually a part of the predicate, complete the meaning of the sentence. They are nouns, pronouns, or adjectives (in the case of predicate adjectives and some object complements). They function as direct objects, indirect objects, and object complements (always with action verbs) and as subject complements (predicate noun or adjective, always with a linking verbs).

A direct object receives the action indicated by a *transitive* verb. It is always in the objective case.

The fox pawed the toy truck.

An indirect object receives the action of the verb indirectly. It is always in the objective case. The subject (through the verb) acts on the direct object, which in turn has an effect on the indirect object. Indirect objects tell to whom or for whom (or what) something is done.

The fox passed Johnny the toy truck.

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You might rearrange the sentence to read:

The fox passed the toy truck to Johnny.

When the preposition (*to*, *above*, or *for*) is understood, the word is an indirect object. When the preposition is expressed, the word is an *object of a preposition*.

Don't forget about *objective complements* which can accompany direct objects. They can modify the object or rename it.

The dog pronounced Tom bald.

The cat pronounced Tom his caretaker.

SUBJECT COMPLEMENTS:

A *predicate adjective* follows a linking verb and modifies the subject, not the verb.

The fox was green.

A *predicate noun* follows a linking verb and renames the subject.

The fox is a dog.

In general, if a subject complement is introduced by an article or other adjective, it is considered a predicate noun.

Find the Subjects and Predicates in the following sentences.

- 1) A rainstorm of great intensity washed the snow away.

- 2) A rattling sound and a crash of thunder shook the foundations of their youth.

- 3) The crew congratulated themselves on the dramatic success of their shoveling.

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4) Nestled in their borrows, the feral cats thought that the job might have been completed more thoroughly.

5) The smell of wet cat fur wafted across the colony.

A *phrase* is a group of words that does not have both subject and predicate. The words in a phrase lock together and operate like an individual part of speech; phrases also have an identifiable internal grammar. Some important kinds of phrases include verb phrases, prepositional phrases, and verbal phrases (e.g. gerund, participial, and infinitive phrases).

The main verb and its auxiliary verbs are called a *verb phrase*:

were spitting
will be splitting
are proven
have been proven

Verbs such as *is, was, were, shall be, are, may be, and have* can be auxiliary verbs and are often called “helping” verbs.

Prepositional phrases arise from the combination of a preposition and a noun or pronoun functioning as its object. Prepositional phrases modify other words in the sentence, that is they act as modifiers.

Cats of many sorts live with Tom.
(adjectival prep. phrase / adverbial prep. phrase)

Identify the phrases underlined in the following sentences.

6) Fred ate the tin of pralines with great gusto.

7) He had received them in a package sent from his young colleague.

8) With an insatiable appetite for pralines, he was pretty much a gonner.

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9) The package had also contained a box of coin tricks and googley-eyed glasses.

10) In a true spirit of contentment, Fred thought about his buddies.

At the base of a *verbal phrase* is a verbal – a gerund, participle, or infinitive. Verbals are verb forms that no longer act as main verbs. Instead they act as a different part of speech. Gerunds act as nouns, participles act as adjectives, and infinitives act as either adjectives, adverbs, or nouns. Verbals can team up with objects or complements and modifiers to create verbal phrases.

Ranging for food keeps Manny and Tilde happy. GERUND PHRASE

Watching out the window, Spuds saw the snow flakes fall. PARTICIPIAL PHRASE

The smokers asked the carpenters to build bigger gazebos. INFINITIVE PHRASE

Identify the phrases underlined in the following sentences.

11) Screeching to a halt, the weak-kneed metaphor stopped WORKING.

12) Having found love on the run, the jogger never looked back.

13) Jane gently ignored the rattling in her mind.

14) To have managed such a feat was spectacular.

15) To roll out of their bunks safely, the youngsters carefully positioned the wooden planks.

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A *clause* is a group of words containing a subject and a predicate. Clauses are either *independent* or *dependent* (if dependent, then *relative* or *subordinate*).

An *independent clause* can stand alone grammatically and form a complete sentence. Two or more independent clauses in one sentence can be joined by coordinating conjunctions, conjunctive adverbs, semicolons, etc.

Dependent clauses fall into two categories, *relative* or *subordinate*. Relative clauses, when viewed as a unit of meaning, function as nouns or adjectives. Subordinate clauses function as nouns, adverbs, or adjectives. Unlike independent clauses, dependent clauses do not express a complete thought in themselves.

That the fat old cat could run rapidly was little known.
(subordinate clause used as a noun – the subject)

Few people knew *that the fat old cat could jump file cabinets*.
(subordinate clause used as noun – a direct object)

The cats *who caught the mouse* were castigated.
(relative clause used as adjective – modifying the subject *cats*)

When dusk comes the herd jumps to life.
(subordinate clause modifying the simple predicate *jumps*)

Identify the following clauses as dependent or independent; if they are dependent, identify the way they function within the sentence (as a noun, adjective, or adverb).

[Whenever heavily laden canoes move down river], [the villagers [who have watched this sort of thing for generations] whistle working tunes], [and they know [that the potato harvest has once again been ample.]]