

On Subjects and Pseudo-subjects

Here is a typical definition of a grammatical subject:

A subject is the concept about which the remainder of the clause makes a statement. It is the person, place or thing doing the action of the clause (with an action verb) or existing (with a linking verb). Find your main verb and then ask “who” or “what”; the answer is the subject.

With some infinitives or infinitive phrases, the action of the infinitive (or its state of being) may be completed by a different person, place or thing than the grammatical subject of the clause. This doer of the infinitive’s action (or state of being) follows the main verb and comes before the infinitive. This is known as the pseudo-subject of the infinitive. If it is present, the pseudo-subject is the concept about which the remainder of the infinitive makes a statement (and it would be a complete statement) if the verb form were a main verb.

In the first example below Jane is a subject of the main verb *swam*; in the second example Jane is a pseudo-subject to the infinitive *to swim*.

Jane swam the back bay.

Susan asked *Jane to swim the back bay*.

The relationship between pseudo-subject and infinitive is closer than the relationship between an indirect and direct object of a transitive verb and the pseudo-subject is bound to the concept of the infinitive.

Susan asked Jane a question.

Susan asked *Jane to question her philosophy*.

Susan gave Jane a smoke.

Susan gave ~~Jane to smoke~~.

Susan helped Jane to record the event.

Susan helped Jane ~~the event~~.

Remember, when a pronoun is the pseudo-subject of an infinitive, it is in the object case. Also, not all infinitives have the marker “to.”

Susan wanted *Jane to help with the bonfire*.

Susan saw *Jane leave*.

Susan helped *her sing the song*.

**Identify the voice of the main verb in the following sentences: active or passive.
Rewrite the sentence, turning it to the opposite voice.**

1. Cutting through the still water at dusk, the canoe left a v-shaped wake spreading behind it.

Voice:

2. Handling the wooden paddle carefully, Lloyd tried to keep the canoe on course.

Voice:

3. Starting from its feeding spot, a great blue heron was disturbed into flight.

Voice:

Underline all verbals or verbal phrases in the following sentences. Identify each correctly as gerund, gerund phrase, participle, participial phrase, infinitive or infinitive phrase. Then explain the grammatical function of each verbal or verbal phrase.

4. Cutting through the still water at dusk, the canoe left a v-shaped wake spreading out behind.

5. Handling the wooden paddle carefully, Lloyd tried to keep the canoe on course, but maintaining a straight forward momentum was difficult to do.

6. Starting from its hidden feeding spot, a great blue heron leapt to escape into the dusk.

Underline the complete subject once; underline the complete predicate twice.

7. Why did Lloyd, an excellent grammarian, find himself in this place at this time?

8. Asking that question over and over, he dipped the paddle once into the water, then twice and then again and again.

Place parentheses around all prepositional phrases in the sentences below. Draw arrows to show how each prepositional phrase modifies other word(s) in the sentence.

9. To find an answer to that question, Lloyd would need to be brutally honest about the past five weeks of his life.

10. From heaven to hell was not that far.

A crowd pleaser. Analyze the grammar of the sentence below. The dependent clause placed in square brackets, by the way, is a subordinate clause functioning (as a unit) as a noun.

I consider [that Stockton University, dedicated to helping students gain independence of mind and thinking, is fortunate to have an osprey as its mascot].