

Identifying Verbs and Subjects

Explanation

This handout will help you identify two of the most important parts of speech, verbs and subjects. Being able to identify verbs and subjects will allow you to create complete and clear sentences; it will also help you understand other grammatical concepts like fragments and run-together sentences.

Connections

See also the “Verb Tenses” handout.

Identifying Verbs

Verbs are easy to identify because they are words that indicate action or a state of being, words like: write, run, tell, have, be, look, feel. Verbs are the only part of speech that gets **conjugated**, that is, that changes tense in order to indicate a particular time frame. This chart contains examples of some of the more common verb tenses:

Present	Past	Future	Present Progressive	Present Perfect	Past Perfect
I <u>learn</u>	I <u>learned</u>	I <u>will learn</u>	I <u>am learning</u>	I <u>have learned</u>	I <u>had learned</u>

For more a comprehensive description of verb tenses and guidelines for using them correctly, see the “Verb Tenses” handout.

Sentences can contain several types of verbs and verb-like words; what we’re interested in is finding the **main verbs**, the words that drive the action of a sentence. While all verbs *can* be conjugated, main verbs are the ones that actually *do* change when the entire sentence changes tense. To find which words are acting as the main verbs in a sentence, then, try changing the tense. For example:

Original sentence:	New tense:
Running a marathon <u>is</u> not fun.	Running a marathon <u>will</u> not <u>be</u> fun.
Hoping to build up her portfolio, the supermodel <u>is going</u> to Paris.	Hoping to build up her portfolio, the supermodel <u>went</u> to Paris.
To escape their stress, Liz and Ryan <u>have been watching</u> bad reality TV.	To escape their stress, Liz and Ryan <u>will be watching</u> bad reality TV.

The bicycle <u>had been</u> left in the rain.	The bicycle <u>was</u> left in the rain.
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Identifying Subjects

The **subject** of a sentence performs the action(s) indicated by the main verb; that is, the subject is the *doer* of the action: the diva was singing (the diva is doing the action of “singing”), the glass broke (the glass is doing the action of “breaking”), the audience started to applaud (the audience is doing the action of “applauding”).

To identify the subject of the sentence, you can ask yourself “who or what is (verb)?”

In the following examples, the subjects have been underlined once and the verbs underlined twice.

Sentence	Question → Subject
<u>Running</u> a marathon <u>is</u> not fun.	What is not fun? <u>running</u>
The <u>supermodel</u> <u>is going</u> to Paris.	Who is going to Paris? the <u>supermodel</u>
<u>Liz</u> and <u>Ryan</u> <u>have been watching</u> bad reality TV.	Who is watching TV? <u>Liz</u> and <u>Ryan</u>
The <u>bicycle</u> <u>had been</u> left in the rain.	What had been left in the rain? the <u>bicycle</u>

As you might have noticed, words that end in **-ing** can sometimes act like subjects:

- Running a marathon is not fun.

and sometimes they act as verbs:

- Liz and Ryan are watching bad reality TV.

As a general guideline, when an **-ing** word is preceded by a form of “be” (i.e. is, are, was, were), it is acting as a verb.

Exercises

Find the subjects and main verbs in the following sentences. Underline the subject(s) once and the main verb(s) twice.

For example: To cheer himself up, he watched old detective movies and ate ice cream.

1. After a long, rainy winter, the woman and her husband had become tired of their small apartment, so they decided to drive to a seedy part of town in search of excitement.
2. The couple had been cruising slowly down a side street, looking for some local nightlife, when they heard music coming from a small bar on the corner.
3. They had just left their car when some stray cats started fighting in a side alley.
4. When couple walked in and sat down at the bar, nobody bothered to look up.
5. At one end of the bar, a tired-looking woman was languidly smoking her cigarette and expertly blowing out smoke rings.
6. The bartender was wiping down the counter and softly whistling to himself.
7. Hunched over a table in the back corner, four men were enjoying a friendly game of cards.
8. A sad Billie Holiday tune had been playing softly from an old jukebox, but once the song was over, the room went silent.
9. Suddenly, a man in the back stood and threw his cards down on the table, cursing loudly.
10. When he began to reach into his pocket, the couple looked at each other anxiously and then hurriedly backed out the door.