

ENGLISH GRAMMAR & PUNCTUATION

Finding Nouns, Verbs, and Subjects

A **noun** is a word or set of words for a person, place, thing, or idea. A noun of more than one word (tennis court, gas station) is called a compound noun.

There are common nouns and proper nouns. Common nouns are words for a general class of people, places, things, and ideas (man, city, award, honesty). They are not capitalized. Proper nouns are always capitalized. They name specific people, places, and things (Joe, Chicago, Academy Award).

A **verb** is a word or set of words that shows action (runs, is going, has been painting); feeling (loves, envies); or state of being (am, are, is, have been, was, seem).

Examples:

- **He ran** around the block.
- **I like** my friend.
- **They seem** friendly.

State-of-being verbs are called linking verbs. They include all forms of the verb to be, plus such words as look, feel, appear, act, go, followed by an adjective. (See the "Adjectives and Adverbs" section later in this chapter.)

Examples:

- You look happy.
- We feel fine.
- He went ballistic.

Verbs often consist of more than one word. For instance, had been breaking down is a four-word verb. It has a two-word main verb, breaking down (also called a phrasal verb), and two helping verbs (had and been). Helping verbs are so named because they help clarify the intended meaning.

Many verbs can function as helping verbs, including is, shall, must, do, has, can, keep, get, start, help, etc.

A **subject** is the noun, pronoun (see the "Pronouns" section later in this chapter), or set of words that performs the verb.

Examples:

- The woman hurried.
- Woman is the subject.
- She was late.
- She is the subject.
- Shakespeare in Love won an Academy Award.
- Shakespeare in Love is the subject.

Rule 1. To find the subject and verb, always find the verb first. Then ask who or what performed the verb.

Examples:

The jet engine **passed** inspection. Passed is the verb. Who or what passed? The engine, so engine is the subject. (If you included the word jet as the subject, lightning will not strike you. But technically, jet is an adjective here and is part of what is known as the complete subject.)

From the ceiling **hung** the chandelier. The verb is hung. Now, if you think ceiling is the subject, slow down. Ask who or what hung. The answer is the chandelier, not the ceiling. Therefore, chandelier is the subject.

Rule 2. Sentences can have more than one subject and more than one verb.

Examples:

- **I like** cake, and **he likes** ice cream. (Two subjects and two verbs)
- **He and I like** cake. (Two subjects and one verb)
- **She lifts** weights and **jogs** daily.

(One subject and two verbs)

Rule 3. If a verb follows to, it is called an infinitive, and it is not the main verb. You will find the main verb either before or after the infinitive.

Examples:

He is trying to leave.
To leave is an infinitive; the main verb is trying.
To leave was his wish.
The main verb is was.

NOTE

One of the most stubborn superstitions in English is that it is wrong to insert a word between the to and the verb in an infinitive. This is called a split infinitive (to gladly pay, to not go). There is no English scholar alive who will say a split infinitive is technically wrong. However, split infinitives tend to be clumsy and unnecessary. Experienced writers do not use them without good reason.

Rule 4. Any request or command, such as Stop! or Walk quickly, has the understood subject you, because if we ask who is to stop or walk quickly, the answer must be "you."

Example:

(You) Please **bring** me some coffee. Bring is the verb. Who will do the bringing? The subject you is understood.

Subject-Verb Agreement

Being able to find the right subject and verb will help you correct errors of subject-verb agreement.

Basic Rule. A singular subject (she, Bill, car) takes a singular verb (is, goes, shines), whereas a plural subject takes a plural verb.

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