

Book 4

**Mastering English
Grammar**

SUBJECTS & VERBS

David Moeller

SUBJECTS AND VERBS

Book 4 of the MASTERING ENGLISH GRAMMAR
Series

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Titles in the *Mastering English Grammar Series*

GENERAL INTRODUCTION: *MASTERING ENGLISH GRAMMAR*

The nine titles in the *Mastering English Grammar* series can be subdivided into three books on the parts of speech, three on sentence structure, and three on punctuation:

Parts of Speech

- Book 1: *Nouns and Adjectives*
- Book 2: *Verbs and Adverbs*
- Book 3: *Pronouns, Prepositions, and Conjunctions*

Sentence Structure

- Book 4: *Subjects and Verbs*
- Book 5: *Compound Sentences*
- Book 6: *Complex Sentences*

Punctuation

- Book 7: *Commas*
- Book 8: *Semicolons and Colons*
- Book 9: *Parentheses, Brackets, Dashes, Ellipses, Italics, and Hyphens*

What sets this series apart from other grammar books is that instead of trying to include all that can be said on the topic of grammar (the data-dump approach), it focuses on those concepts that promise a higher return on investment (ROI). In other words, as much as possible, the books in this series aim to translate the study of grammar into more competent reading and writing.

The term *generative* refers to a study of grammar or rhetoric that helps us achieve in writing what we wouldn't have been able to achieve otherwise. Generative grammar is grammar at its most practical—it's grammar we can use. Such generative material has been sprinkled throughout the pages of the books in this series.

The nine books in this series constitute a writer's grammar. The *Mastering*

that appears in the series title is not a reference to earning high scores on grammar quizzes; instead, it refers to increasing our ability to understand the texts of others and to formulate words, phrases, and clauses while writing. Ultimately, we will want to use the knowledge we gain to *generate* more complex structures as we write.

All nine books in this series contain exercises (called *Your Turn*), a book-ending *Test Questions* section, and answers to all exercise and test questions.

Ultimately, the aim of each title is to equip you with some knowledge and some practical skills to add to your arsenal of writing strategies.

E-Book Vs. Print

Because the nine titles in the series contain exercises and test questions, a discussion of the difference between an e-book and a print book is really a discussion of writing out answers vs. working out answers in our heads. The e-books in this series are designed to accommodate the limitations of e-readers. For example, to reduce scrolling, answers follow immediately upon the heels of questions. When access to reference material—like word lists, for example—is necessary, that material will reappear in those places where it is needed.

Print versions, on the other hand, leave room for writing out answers or marking up text. And in the print versions, the answers are in the back of the book.

INTRODUCTION TO BOOK 4: *SUBJECTS AND VERBS*

Welcome to *Book 4: Subjects and Verbs*, a book that teaches how sentences rest upon subjects and verbs, the foundational building blocks on which sentences are constructed.

A sentence is a word group that contains a subject and a verb and can stand alone. Because subjects and verbs are the determining factors in deciding which word groups are sentences and which are not, the skill of determining subjects and verbs is emphasized throughout this e-book.

We will learn a variety of subject-verb identification skills, including how to eliminate the words and phrases that interfere with our ability to recognize subjects and verbs. Most subjects and verbs are of the first-a-subject-then-a-verb variety, but we will also study compound subjects, compound verbs, and sentence structures in which subjects and verbs appear out of their usual order. We will study those areas where our knowledge of subjects and verbs helps us to avoid writing errors—errors such as run-on sentences, sentence fragments, and subject-verb agreement errors. This chapter concludes with some practice in adding some flair to your sentence style through the use of intentional fragments and sentences in a series.

Key terms are boldfaced; boldfaced terms reappear in the Glossary of Terms. Whenever you feel that a definition of a key term would be helpful, you can always navigate to the Glossary.

Apply Your Learning

There will be much to learn in the pages ahead. But this book will not be truly beneficial unless it translates into more skillful reading and writing. So in addition to studying the lessons in this book, try to notice when the teachings found in this book match the skills you encounter in the reading you do elsewhere. And most importantly, start applying the sentence structures described in the book. Each time you sit down to write, push yourself by adorning your own writing with some of the patterns and devices you will learn about in the following chapters.

Lesson 1: Subjects and Predicates

A basic English sentence requires an action and a performer of that action. We call the action portion of a sentence the **predicate**; we call the performer portion of a sentence the **subject**. Most commonly, subjects appear to the left of predicates.

We can divide a sentence into its subject and predicate with a slash (/), like this:

- subject / predicate

The subject will likely be a *who* or *what*; the predicate will likely tell us what the *who* or *what* does.

Examples:

- A girl / flings her hair down. (Who? *A girl*. Does what? *Flings her hair down*.)
- The whole world / fits into seventeen syllables. (What? *The whole world*. Does what? *Fits into seventeen syllables*.)

YOUR TURN 1

Note: This being an e-book, the Your Turn exercises are intended to be done mentally. Answers to the Your Turn exercises follow the exercises.

For each of the following, identify where the subject ends and the predicate begins. In other words, where would you place a slash?

example: A girl flings her hair down.

answer: girl / flings

1. The kids get candy.
2. The nosy neighbors moved into the empty houses.
3. The Persian astronomer began walking toward the hills.
4. Pure water spills from the cup of the daisy.
5. Grandfather carried his voice in the wrinkled palm of his right hand.

ANSWERS 1

1. The kids / get candy.
2. The nosy neighbors / moved into the empty houses.
3. The Persian astronomer / began walking toward the hills.
4. Pure water / spills from the cup of the daisy.
5. Grandfather / carried his voice in the wrinkled palm of his right hand.

Lesson 2: Sentences Contain Subjects and Verbs

When we look at subjects and predicates—as we did in Lesson 1—we are accounting for every word in a sentence. We can think of *subject-predicate* as one lens for looking at sentence structure. Another such lens is the lens of *subject-verb*. With subject-verb, we are no longer accounting for every word in a sentence; instead, we are focusing on the key, foundational words only.

DEFINITION: What is a sentence? A group of words containing a **subject** and a **verb**.

The subject and verb are the most important words in a sentence. They give any sentence an excuse for existing, and they are the life-support system for all the other words in a sentence. In a hypothetical 100-word sentence with a one-word subject and a one-word verb, the other 98 words exist only because the subject and verb authorize their existence. Remove either the subject or verb, and the entire 100-word structure comes crashing down.

To name the foundational subject and verb within any sentence, we'll use the term **base sentence**:

- **base sentence = subject + verb**

TYPEFACE CONVENTION: Throughout this e-book, subjects are underlined and verbs are boldfaced, as seen below with Zeus **roared**.

Example:

- His robes flowing behind him, Zeus, who had just given birth to Athena, **roared**, hurling the Titans down into the Underworld.

In the sentence above, *Zeus* is the subject and *roared* is the verb. In addition to the one-word subject and the one-word verb, this sentence contains three other groups of words:

- his robes flowing behind him
- who had just given birth to Athena
- hurling the Titans down into the Underworld

By themselves, each of these word groups is a fragment and cannot stand alone. However, when attached to a base sentence like *Zeus roared*, these fragments are allowed to exist as part of a larger sentence.

YOUR TURN 2

Each of the following sentences contains some stylish phrases, yet each is built upon the foundation of a one-word subject and a one-word verb. For each, single underline the one-word subject and double underline the one-word verb. All answers will consist of two words only.

example: A young soldier stands on battle-pocked land with his helmet at a jaunty tilt.

base sentence: soldier stands

1. Huddling together for warmth, we sat, troubled by noises that came from outside.
2. She stared, watching the traffic, thinking about her boyfriend.
3. Her face angry, her mouth twitching in disgust, Molly gestured.

ANSWERS 2

1. Huddling together for warmth, we **sat**, troubled by noises that came from outside. [**base sentence:** *we sat*]
2. She **stared**, watching the traffic, thinking about her boyfriend. [**base sentence:** *she stared*]
3. Her face angry, her mouth twitching in disgust, Molly **gestured**. [**base sentence:** *Molly gestured*]

FYI: Note on Predicates and Objects

The sentence *Hank hit the ball* can be seen as a two-part sentence or a three-part sentence. As a two-part sentence, the sentence contains a subject and a predicate:

subject: *Hank*

predicate: *hit the ball*

As a three-part sentence, *Hank hit the ball* contains a subject, a verb, and an object:

subject: *Hank*

verb: *hit*

object: *the ball*

This e-book has a specific focus, and that focus is subjects and verbs. As a result, little attention will be paid to those words over to the right of the verb. We are looking carefully at words that appear on the left side of sentences because many of those words interfere with our ability to identify subjects, but the words that appear to the right of verbs don't interfere with our ability to identify verbs and, for that reason, we will pay little attention to them.

Lesson 3: Complete Subjects Vs. Simple Subjects

Here are two sentences we looked at earlier:

- A girl flings her hair down.
- The whole world fits into seventeen syllables.

By placing slash marks to the right of *girl* and *world*, we identify *a girl* and *the whole world* as the subjects of those sentences. Now let's fine-tune our understanding of subject.

Each of the two sentences above contains both a **complete subject** and a **simple subject**. The simple subject is hidden within the larger complete subject. The complete subject consists of all the words to the left of the slash mark; the simple subject will usually consist of a one-word noun or a pronoun.

Though a simple subject will usually be one word long, there are a few exceptions—like a person's name, for example. The two words *John Doe* can serve as a simple subject because we cannot reduce the two words to anything less.

- A girl / flings her hair down. (In this sentence, *a girl* is the complete subject, but *girl* is the simple subject.)
- The whole world / fits into seventeen syllables. (In this sentence, *the whole world* is the complete subject, but *world* is the simple subject.)

Many of the words within a complete subject cannot contend for the position of simple subject. Eliminating these words from contention makes the job of identifying simple subjects that much easier.

We'll begin by eliminating **articles** (*a*, *an*, and *the*) and **adjectives**. In the complete subject *a girl* we can eliminate the article *a*; in the complete subject *the whole world*, we can eliminate the article *the* and the adjective *whole*:

- a girl
- ~~the~~ whole world

Definition: A **noun phrase** is a group of words that functions as a noun.

In many cases, a complete subject is a noun phrase, and vice versa. Both of our complete subjects from above also happen to be noun phrases. Note that, in most cases, the right-hand word in a noun phrase is the simple subject.

- (a girl)
- (the whole world)

When relevant, we will enclose noun phrases within parentheses—a shortcut that says *the word to the right is your simple subject*.

YOUR TURN 3

In this lesson, we learned that:

- Simple subjects can be found within complete subjects.
- When identifying simple subjects, we can eliminate articles and adjectives from contention.
- Within a noun phrase that serves as the complete subject, the right-hand word is usually the simple subject.

For each of the following, answer the questions that accompany each of the sentences. Each simple subject is a one-word subject.

example: (*The nosy neighbors / moved into the empty houses.*)

questions and answers:

What is the complete subject? *the nosy neighbors*

What article can be eliminated? *the* (We are searching within the complete subject only.)

What adjective can be eliminated? *nosy*

What is the one-word simple subject that is the right-hand word of the complete subject? *neighbors*

1. *The kids get candy.*

What is the complete subject?

What article can be eliminated?

What is the one-word simple subject that is the right-hand word of the complete subject?

2. *The Persian astronomer began walking toward the hills.*

What is the complete subject?

What article can be eliminated?

What adjective can be eliminated?

What is the one-word simple subject that is the right-hand word of the complete subject?

3. *Pure water spills from the cup of the daisy.*

What is the complete subject?

What adjective can be eliminated?

What is the one-word simple subject that is the right-hand word of the complete subject?

4. *Grandfather carried his voice in the wrinkled palm of his right hand.*

What is the complete subject?

What is the simple subject?

ANSWERS 3

1. (*The kids*) *get candy.*

What is the complete subject? *the kids*

What article can be eliminated? *the*

What is the one-word simple subject that is the right-hand word of the complete subject? *kids*

2. (*The Persian astronomer*) *began walking toward the hills.*

What is the complete subject? *the Persian astronomer*

What article can be eliminated? *the*

What adjective can be eliminated? *Persian*

What is the one-word simple subject that is the right-hand word of the complete subject? *astronomer*

3. (*Pure water*) *spills from the cup of the daisy.*

What is the complete subject? *pure water*

What adjective can be eliminated? *pure*

What is the one-word simple subject that is the right-hand word of the complete subject? *water*

4. (*Grandfather*) *carried his voice in the wrinkled palm of his right hand.*

What is the complete subject? *Grandfather*

What is the simple subject? *Grandfather* (This is a *gotcha* question. With a one-word subject, the simple subject and the complete subject are the same.)

Lesson 4: Eliminating Prepositional Phrases

In the previous Your Turn, we encountered such complete subjects as *pure water* and *the Persian astronomer*. Each of these word groups is, in fact, a noun phrase. A noun phrase is a word group that functions as if it were a single-word noun. *The Persian astronomer*, for example, is a three-word noun phrase; the three words work together to name one single entity.

We learned that, in most cases, if we want to identify the simple subject from within a complete subject (or noun phrase), we simply find the noun (or pronoun) to the right. There are, however, some exceptions to this strategy.

One such exception can be found in this sentence:

- Engines of war / move toward certain houses.

In this sentence, *engines of war* is a noun phrase, but within that noun phrase is the two-word **prepositional phrase** *of war*. Applying the noun-to-the-right trick would lead us into incorrectly identifying *war* as the simple subject. To avoid this error, we will eliminate all prepositional phrases—no subjects will be found within them.

- Engines ~~of war~~ / move toward certain houses.

With the prepositional phrase eliminated, the only word remaining is the simple subject *engines*:

- Engines ~~of war~~ / move toward certain houses.

Rule: Simple subjects may be found within noun phrases, but they will not be found within other types of phrases. So in our quest to identify simple subjects, we can eliminate any phrase that isn't a noun phrase.

Our next step, then, is to learn to identify prepositional phrases. Prepositional phrases begin with **prepositions** and end with nouns or pronouns. (The phrase-ending noun is known as the **object of the preposition**.) Prepositional phrases are easy to identify when we have access to a list of common prepositions, like this one:

- *ABOVE, ACROSS, AGAINST, AROUND, AT, BEFORE, BEHIND, BELOW, BETWEEN, BY, DOWN, EXCEPT, FOR, FROM, IN, INTO, LIKE, OF, ON, PAST, SINCE, TO, UNDER, UNTIL, WITH.*

TYPEFACE CONVENTION: In the pages ahead, we will encounter many different types of phrases and clauses. Many of those phrases and clauses can be identified by their first word. When this is the case—as it is with prepositional phrases—those key starter words will be set in small caps.

YOUR TURN 4

For each of the following sentences, identify the simple subject by following these three steps:

- (A) Determine where the complete subject ends and the predicate begins. (Where would you place a slash mark?)
- (B) Cross out (mentally eliminate) any prepositional phrases appearing within the complete subject (to the left of your imaginary slash mark).
- (C) The remaining word is the simple subject of the sentence.

example: Workers ~~IN a manhole~~ / imagine themselves working at other professions.

answer:

(A) Workers ~~IN a manhole~~ / imagine themselves working at other professions.

(B) ~~IN a manhole~~

(C) workers

In the four sentences that follow, one prepositional phrase is two words long; one is three words long; two are four words long. Remember, **prepositional phrases begin with prepositions**. To help reduce the need to scroll up, the list of prepositions reappears here:

- ABOVE, ACROSS, AGAINST, AROUND, AT, BEFORE, BEHIND, BELOW, BETWEEN, BY, DOWN, EXCEPT, FOR, FROM, IN, INTO, LIKE, OF, ON, PAST, SINCE, TO, UNDER, UNTIL, WITH
1. Explorers in the jungle stalk a rare green deer.
 2. Trees on the cypress mountain blend into the autumn evening.
 3. Reapers with scythes spend the afternoon sharpening their blades.
 4. Writers of well-written sonnets fill their first eight lines with a single meaning.

ANSWERS 4

1. Explorers ~~IN the jungle~~ / stalk a rare green deer.
2. Trees ~~ON the cypress mountain~~ / blend into the autumn evening.
3. Reapers ~~WITH scythes~~ / spend the afternoon sharpening their blades.
4. Writers ~~OF well-written sonnets~~ / fill their first eight lines with a single meaning.

Lesson 5: Eliminating Relative Clauses

So far, we have learned to cross out—or mentally eliminate—articles, adjectives, and prepositional phrases. As we strip away the words that cannot function as the simple subject of a sentence, our goal of determining the simple subject of a sentence becomes that much easier.

In this lesson we'll learn to eliminate a fourth non-contender—**relative clauses**.

Relative clauses begin with **relative pronouns**: *who*, *that*, *which*, *whom*, and *whose*.

Example:

- Anyone who falls in love / knows the movement of time.

In this example, *anyone who falls in love* is the complete subject. By eliminating the relative clause *who falls in love*, we arrive at our simple subject: *anyone*. Note that we are eliminating not just the single relative pronoun *who*, but the entire relative clause *who falls in love*.

- Anyone ~~who falls in love~~ / knows the movement of time.

People (*Who*) Vs. Things (*That* and *Which*)

- anyone WHO falls in love

The relative pronoun *who* will follow subjects that name people, as we see in the example above. (The subject *anyone* is a word that refers to people.)

For *things*, however, we use the relative pronouns *that* and *which*.

- The object THAT sits in the center of the circle resembles a silver tear.
- The coffee, WHICH may have been brewed yesterday, was bitter.

In these two examples, the relative pronoun *that* follows the thing *object*, and the relative pronoun *which* follows the thing *coffee*.

Once again, we eliminate the relative clauses as possible locations of our sentence's subject:

- The object resembles a silver tear.
- The coffee was bitter.

Because *which*-clauses are already separated from the subject by a comma, the following Your Turn will contain examples of *who*- and *that*-clauses only.

YOUR TURN 5

For each of the following sentences, identify the simple subject by following these three steps:

- (A) Determine where the complete subject ends and the predicate begins. (Where would you place a slash mark?)
- (B) Cross out (mentally eliminate) any articles (*a*, *an*, and *the*) and relative clauses appearing within the complete subject to the left of your imaginary slash mark.
- (C) The remaining word is the simple subject of the sentence.

example: The journey THAT goes against the prevailing current / requires more preparation.

answer:

(A) The journey THAT goes against the prevailing current / requires more preparation.

(B) ~~The; THAT goes against the prevailing current~~

(C) journey

1. A man who sees an empty street stumbles in his attempt to rise.
2. The trout that swim in the center of the river keep themselves safe.
3. The boys who respect the mysterious leader bow their heads to their chests.
4. An eye that looked upon him blinked in warning.

ANSWERS 5

1. A man ~~WHO sees an empty street~~ / stumbles in his attempt to rise.
2. The trout ~~THAT swim in the center of the river~~ / keep themselves safe.
3. The boys ~~WHO respect the mysterious leader~~ / bow their heads to their chests.
4. An eye ~~THAT looked upon him~~ / blinked in warning.

Lesson 6: Verbs Vs. Predicates

We have seen that there are two ways of looking at subjects. We can focus on larger word groups, in which case we are looking at complete subjects; or we can focus on smaller, more essential word groups, in which case we are looking at simple subjects.

This same principle of focusing on larger or smaller word groups also applies to **verbs**. We've already met the larger word groups; these are the words over to the right side of our slash marks, and we call these **predicates**. But lurking within each predicate is a smaller word group (as short as a single word) known as the verb of the sentence.

As we read prose, the sentence pattern we encounter more than any other pattern looks like this:

- Complete subject with a simple subject within it / predicate with a verb within it.

Here are two sentences:

- A girl / **flings** her hair down.
- The baby / **crawls** along the sidewalk.

In the first example, the predicate is *flings her hair down*, but the verb is *flings*. In the second example, the predicate is *crawls along the sidewalk*, but the verb is *crawls*. In each case, note how the single word is nested within the larger word group.

Verbs take tense; for example, a verb can be in the past or in the present tense. Because verbs take tense, we will test for verbs using this test sentence:

- Today I BLANK; yesterday I BLANKED.

Let's try this test sentence with the verb *crawl*:

- Today I crawl; yesterday I crawled.

This test sentence does do a good job of testing for verbs, but it does an even better job of determining which words are *not* verbs. Let's test each word in *crawls along the sidewalk* for its verb-ness. If the word is not a verb, placing it in the test sentence will create nonsense.

- Today I crawl; yesterday I crawled. —good
- Today I along; yesterday I alonged. —nonsense
- Today I the; yesterday I the-ed. — nonsense
- Today I sidewalk; yesterday I sidewalked. — nonsense

As a rule, **main verbs** consist of one single word. However, **phrasal verbs** are exceptions to this rule. Phrasal verbs consist of a verb plus a preposition.

Here are a few examples of phrasal verbs:

- *back up, calm down, cross out, hand over, throw away, try on, wash off.*

YOUR TURN 6

For each, identify the verb. Use the test sentence to test for that word's verb-ness.

example: I pity the exile's lot.

answer: Today I pity; yesterday I pitied.

1. A knife glimmered in the kitchen.
2. New lives require a death of some kind.
3. The light fills the world.
4. A poetry of bodies trickled from the deepest fountain.

ANSWERS 6

1. A knife **glimmered** in the kitchen. [Today I glimmer; yesterday I glimmered.]
2. New lives **require** a death of some kind. [Today I require; yesterday I required.]
3. The light **fills** the world. [Today I fill; yesterday I filled.]
4. A poetry of bodies **trickled** from the deepest fountain. [Today I trickle; yesterday I trickled.]

Lesson 7: Main Verbs and Helping Verbs

In Lesson 6, we learned that verbs take tense and, because verbs take tense, we can test for verbs using this test sentence: Today I BLANK; yesterday I BLANKED.

In reality, that test sentence tests for **main verbs**. But in addition to determining those words that qualify as main verbs, we also want to determine those words that qualify as helping verbs.

Determining which words are **helping verbs** is actually quite simple: we simply need to ask “Is it on the list?” Here is the list of 23 helping verbs:

- *is, am, are, was, were*
- *be, being, been*
- *has, have, had*
- *do, does, did*
- *may, might, must*
- *can, could*
- *shall, should*
- *will, would*

By adding one or more helping verbs to a main verb, we create what is known as a **verb phrase**.

- A **main verb** + one or more **helping verbs** = a **verb phrase**.

When our main verb is a one-word main verb, the longest verb phrase we can create is a verb phrase of four words. However, whether our verbs are one-, two-, three-, or four-words long, we will simply refer to them as *verbs*.

Example:

- Not every song / **should drift** past every ear and heart.

(Note that our focus is now to the *right* of the slash mark.)

First we identify our main verb: *drift*. Does it take tense? Today I drift;

yesterday I drifted. Yes, it takes tense; it's the main verb in the sentence.

Then we move to the left: *should*. Is it on the list? Yes, it's on the list. It's a helping verb.

What is the verb in this sentence? Answer: *should drift*.

Another example:

- These golden bees / **may have been making** sweet honey for the past five years or longer.

First let's identify our main verb: *making*. Does it take tense? Today I make; yesterday I made. Yes, it takes tense; it's the main verb in the sentence.

Then we move to the left: *been*. Is it on the list? Yes, it's on the list. It's a helping verb.

Continue to the left: *have*. Is it on the list? Yes, it's on the list. It's a helping verb.

Continue to the left: *may*. Is it on the list? Yes, it's on the list. It's a helping verb.

What is the verb in this sentence? Answer: *may have been making*.

YOUR TURN 7

Using the tests for main verbs and helping verbs described in the lesson above, identify the verb in each of the following sentences. Two of the verbs are two words long and two of the verbs are three words long.

example: The eye-balls **were seared** with a milky mucus.

answer: were seared [*Today I sear; yesterday I seared; “were” is on the list.*]

The list of 23 helping verbs:

- *is, am, are, was, were, be, being, been, has, have, had, do, does, did, may, might, must, can, could, shall, should, will, would*
1. A tree’s name should reveal its nature.
 2. He may be dangling a head by its hair.
 3. They’re curling on the pavement. (*They’re* is a contraction. We must unpack the contraction into the two words *they are*.)
 4. More than one shaky answer has been given to this question.

ANSWERS 7

1. A tree's name / **should reveal** its nature. [*Today I reveal; yesterday I revealed; "should" is on the list.*]
2. He / **may be dangling** a head by its hair. [*Today I dangle; yesterday I dangled; "be" is on the list; "may" is on the list.*]
3. They / **'re curling** on the pavement. [*Today I curl; yesterday I curled; "are" is on the list.*]
4. More than one shaky answer / **has been given** to this question. [*Today I give; yesterday I gave; "been" is on the list; "has" is on the list.*]

In each case, the main verb sits to the right of the helping verbs.

Lesson 8: Subjects and Verbs: The Foundations of Sentences

Review: We began by looking at sentences as complete subjects plus predicates, and we indicated where complete subjects end and predicates begin by placing a slash mark between them. Then we began reducing complete subjects and predicates to simple subjects and verbs. It's the subjects and verbs—not the complete subjects and predicates—that serve as a sentence's essential, foundational words. In fact, to identify a sentence's subject and verb is to identify the **base sentence** upon which that sentence is built.

We learned that, with subjects, we often need to delete words or word groups to arrive at the one-word subject. We learned that verbs are one-, two-, three-, or four-words long, and that we can use the *Does it take tense?* test to test for main verbs and the *Is it on the list?* test to test for helping verbs.

Now let's put all our learning together.

Example:

- The hands of a plasterer are holding a room together.

With this sentence, we begin by placing a slash between the complete subject and the predicate. To the left of the slash, we eliminate the article *the* and the prepositional phrase *of a plasterer*, leaving only the simple subject: *hands*. To the right of the slash, we apply the verb tests and discover that *holding* is the main verb and *are* is a helping verb.

- The hands of a plasterer / **are holding** a room together.

What is the subject-verb (base sentence) of this sentence? *Hands are holding*. Ultimately, the words *hands are holding* are the key, foundational words that make this sentence a sentence.

Another example:

- This new self that we have created does not trample the living.

Once again, we begin by placing a slash between the complete subject and

the predicate. To the left of the slash, we eliminate the relative clause *that we have created*. We identify a three-word noun phrase *this new self* and know that *self*—the word to the right—is our simple subject. Using the verb tests to the right of the slash, we identify *does trample* as the verb. (Note that the adverb *not* fails both verb tests.)

- (This new self) ~~that we have created~~ / **does** not **trample** the living.

What is the subject-verb (base sentence) of this sentence? *Self does trample*. Ultimately, the words *self does trample* are the key, foundational words that make this sentence a sentence.

YOUR TURN 8

Identify the base sentences (subjects and verbs) in the following sentences by answering the questions that follow each numbered sentence.

1. The human beings who are truly alive will journey all about the globe.

Where do we place the slash?

What four-word relative clause do we eliminate?

In the remaining noun phrase, the word to the right is the simple subject.

What word is this?

Which word passes the test for main verb?

Moving to the left, which word passes the test for helping verb?

Ultimately, this sentence is built upon what three-word base sentence?

2. The last lion might be roaring his furious, golden protest.

Where do we place the slash?

In the complete subject, the word to the right is the simple subject. What word is this?

Which word passes the test for main verb?

Moving to the left, which word passes the test for helping verb?

Moving to the left once again, which word passes the test for helping verb?

Ultimately, this sentence is built upon what four-word base sentence?

3. The wounded heart in your chest will somehow be sustained by your knowing the rightness of it all.

Where do we place the slash?

What three-word prepositional phrase do we eliminate?

In the remaining noun phrase, the word to the right is the simple subject.

What word is this?

Which word passes the test for main verb?

Moving to the left, which word passes the test for helping verb?

Moving to the left once again, which word *does not pass* the test for helping verb?

Moving to the left once again, which word passes the test for helping verb?

Ultimately, this sentence is built upon what four-word base sentence?

ANSWERS 8

1. (Those human beings) ~~who are truly alive~~ / **will journey** all about the globe. [**base sentence:** *beings will journey*]
2. (The last lion) / **might be roaring** his furious, golden protest. [**base sentence:** *lion might be roaring*]
3. (The wounded heart) ~~in your chest~~ / **will** somehow **be sustained** by your righteousness. [**base sentence:** *heart will be sustained*]

Lesson 9: Active Vs. Passive Verbs

Study these two sentences:

- **active** sentence: Alfred Nobel established the Nobel prizes.
- **passive** sentence: The Nobel Prizes were established by Alfred Nobel.

By studying these two sentences, we note the following:

- Though the word order differs, these two sentences say the same thing.
- The concepts *active* and *passive* have nothing to do with how much action is occurring.
- The passive sentence contains two extra words: (1) the helping verb *were* and (2) the preposition *by*. [The Nobel Prizes **were** established **by** Alfred Nobel.]

In addition, when we examine the subjects and verbs of the **active** and **passive** sentences above, we notice a curious situation. In the active sentence, the subject is performing the action of the verb. Alfred Nobel is doing the establishing.

But in the passive sentence the performer of the verb has been kicked out of the subject position and demoted to the end of the sentence. This is why active sentences are often preferable to passive sentences.

- **active:** Alfred Nobel established the Nobel prizes. [*“Alfred Nobel” sits to the left of the action he is performing.*]
- **passive:** The Nobel Prizes were established by Alfred Nobel. [*“Alfred Nobel” now sits to the right of the action he is performing.*]

In the preceding lessons, we’ve already established the general principle that subjects appear to the left of verbs. To that principle, let’s overlay another principle: **it is often preferable to place actors to the left of actions.**

Study these two sentences:

- **active:** The scythe startled the field rat.
- **passive:** The field rat was startled by the scythe.

The action in these two sentences is the action of *startling*. The actor (the

person or thing performing the action) is the scythe—a long handle with a sharp blade at the end. In the passive sentence, the field rat is not the actor. The field rat is not startling anyone. In the active sentence, the scythe *is* the actor. The active sentence correctly places the actor to the left of the action.

- **active:** The scythe startled the field rat.
- **passive:** The field rat was startled by the scythe. [*Here, the scythe has been demoted to the end position.*]

In summary, active sentences are generally to be preferred because, unlike passive sentences, active sentences place actors to the left of actions.

Because active and passive sentences are flip-flopped versions of one another, we can devise a simple method for converting passive sentences to active:

First divide a passive sentence into three parts: a person or thing / an action / a person or thing.

- a cinder-block wall / is shared / by two houses

Eliminate the preposition *by* and the helping verb to the left of the main verb:

- a cinder-block wall / is shared / ~~by~~ two houses

Ask the person or thing on the left to kindly trade places with the person or thing on the right:

- two houses / shared / a cinder-block wall

If necessary, fix the verb tense:

- two houses / **share** / a cinder-block wall

And—voilà!—we’ve converted a passive sentence to an active.

- Two houses **share** a cinder-block wall.

YOUR TURN 9

Using the flip-flopping sequence described above, convert the following passive sentences to active sentences.

1. The branches have been conquered by the weight of birds. [*Keep have but convert it to has.*]
2. An announcement or two could be made by a child-ventriloquist.
3. A blue-bottomed saucer was toppled by the sky.
4. The harpoons are hurled by beings made in the image of Jehovah.

ANSWERS 9

1. The weight of birds has conquered the branches.
2. A child-ventriloquist could make an announcement or two.
3. The sky toppled a blue-bottomed saucer.
4. Beings made in the image of Jehovah hurl the harpoons.

Note that in all cases actors now sit to the left of the actions they perform.

Lesson 10: Compound Subjects and Compound Verbs

Examples of compound subjects:

- Our souls, our reason, our thumbs, and our speech / devoted themselves to learning the truth.

Souls, reason, thumbs, and speech create the **compound subject**. Note that the conjunction *and* is not part of the subject.

- His gold chariots and courtiers / might be gone.

Chariots and courtiers create the compound subject.

Examples of compound verbs:

- He / **lived, died, and was resurrected** many times.

Lived, died, and was resurrected create the **compound verb**.

- She / **rose** one morning and **discovered** the truth and **went** ~~to~~-live in America.

Rose, discovered, and went create the compound verb.

Note that verbs following the word *to* are **infinitives**. Though infinitives are members of the verb family, they do not serve as the foundational verb in any sentence. Therefore, we will eliminate all infinitives (*to* + a verb).

- . . . **went** ~~to~~-live in America.

Examples of compound subjects *and* compound verbs:

- An army of mercenaries and (their paymasters) / **will be approaching** the hut and **knocking** at the door.

Army and paymasters create the compound subject; *will be approaching* and *knocking* create the compound verb.

- Stanford or Crocker / **stole** our pensions and **poured** their smoke into our

lungs.

Stanford and *Crocker* create the compound subject; *stole* and *poured* create the compound verb.

Note that although *and* is the conjunction most often used in compounding, other conjunctions can be used as well. Here, the conjunction *or* is used: *Stanford or Crocker*.

YOUR TURN 10

Determine the subject-verb in each of the following. Use all the subject-verb hunting tools described in the previous lessons, beginning with a slash between the complete subject and the predicate. The number in parentheses is the number of words in the base sentence (the subject-verb combination).

1. The pain of loss, the grief, and the despair ignite the transformation. (4)
2. An auto wreck invites the occult mind, cancels our physics with a sneer, and spatters our clear conclusion across the expedient and wicked stones. (4)
3. The egg of the wren and the singing toad favor the angels and adorn the parlors of heaven. (4)

ANSWERS 10

1. The pain of loss, the grief, and the despair / **ignite** the transformation. [base sentence: *pain, grief, despair ignite*]
2. (An auto wreck) / **invites** the occult mind, **cancel**s our physics with a sneer, and **spatters** our clear conclusion across the expedient and wicked stones. [base sentence: *wreck invites, cancels, spatters*]
3. The egg of the ~~wren~~ and (the singing toad) / **favor** the angels and **adorn** the parlors of heaven. [base sentence: *egg, toad favor, adorn*]

Lesson 11: Verbs Before Subjects

As a general rule, subjects appear to the left of verbs—as has been the case with the sentences we’ve looked at so far. However, there are a few sentence patterns that reverse this customary order by shifting their verbs to the left of their subjects.

The following sentences are paired sentences. Each pair consists of a straightforward sentence pattern and the flip-flopped version of that same sentence pattern. In the flip-flopped version, verbs will appear before subjects.

Note also the similarity between the sentences below and the active-passive flip-flopping we did in Lesson 9. In both cases, the verb remains fixed to the center, while the words and word groups from each side of the verb trade places.

- **subject-verb-prepositional phrase:** The starling **leaned** upon his western wing.
- **prepositional phrase-verb-subject:** Upon his western wing **leaned** the starling.
- **subject-verb-predicate adjective:** The trousers **appeared** baggy in the waist and legs. (The word *baggy* is the predicate adjective: *baggy* describes the noun *trousers*.)
- **predicate adjective-verb-subject:** Baggy in the waist and legs **appeared** the trousers.
- **subject-verb-predicate nominative:** We **were** a dozen boys and girls. (*Nominative* means *noun*. *A dozen boys and girls* is a noun phrase that renames or is the equivalent of the subject *we*.)
- **predicate nominative-verb-subject:** A dozen boys and girls **were** we.

Another sentence pattern that places the verb before the subject is the **expletive** construction. Expletives are sentences that begin with *it*, *there*, or *here*, followed by a *to be* verb (*is*, *am*, *are*, *was*, *were*). The expletive word (*it*, *there*, *here*) is like a placeholder word. Because expletives are not the

subjects of sentences, we will eliminate them.

- **it expletive:** It is a flash ~~from some other domain~~.

The subject-verb is *flash is*.

- **there expletive:** There **was** (a sudden break) ~~in the subject matter~~.

The subject-verb is *break was*.

- **here expletive:** Here **are** (ten thousand fruit) ~~to touch~~.

The subject-verb is *fruit are*.

YOUR TURN 11

For each of the following, cross out (mentally eliminate) prepositional phrases, articles, and expletive words. Then identify the subject-verb of the sentence. In each sentence, the subject will be found to the right of the verb.

1. Into the cellar bin rolled the load of apples.
2. Victims of his fits of pride were they.
3. Watchful like a mother hen appeared the musician.
4. There was the sound of my long scythe.
5. It is a reminder to remain in the truth.

ANSWERS 11

1. ~~Into the cellar bin~~ **rolled** (the load of apples).

base sentence: *load rolled*

2. ~~Victims of his fits of pride~~ **were** they. [*“Victims” is a predicate nominative renaming the subject “they.”*]

base sentence: *they were*

3. ~~Watchful like a mother hen~~ **appeared** (the musician). [*“Watchful” is a predicate adjective describing the subject “musician.”*]

base sentence: *musician appeared*

4. ~~There was~~ (the sound of my long scythe). [*The expletive “there” is eliminated.*]

base sentence: *sound was*

5. ~~It is~~ (a reminder to remain in the truth). [*The expletive “it” is eliminated, as is the infinitive phrase “to remain in the truth.”*]

base sentence: *reminder is*

Note that when we raise our word and phrase elimination to a more aggressive pitch, we leave little else behind but the subject and verb we are hunting for.

Lesson 12: Subjects and Verbs in Commands and Questions

Simple sentences can be categorized as one of the following:

- **Declarative** sentences are standard, statement-making sentences. Most sentences are declarative.
- **Exclamatory** sentences show strong emotion.
- **Imperative** sentences issue a command.
- **Interrogative** sentences ask questions.

So far, the sentences we've been studying have been **declarative**. Declarative sentences are created from standard subjects and verbs with the subject (usually) to the left of the verb. However, both **imperative** sentences and **interrogative** sentences deviate from the standard subject-verb pattern found in declarative sentences.

Subjects and Verbs in Imperative Sentences

A sentence is a sentence because it contains a subject and a verb. However, there is an exception to that rule, and that exception is found in imperative sentences—sentences that issue commands.

Examples:

- **Ask** the questions that have no answers.
- **Sing**. (Normally, the shortest complete sentence is a two-word sentence; but in the case of commands, one single word can be considered a complete sentence.)

In the first example, the person being spoken to is being told (commanded) to ask a certain type of question. In the second example, the person being spoken to is being told to sing.

If we were giving a command, we would likely be giving that command to someone who knows that he or she is being spoken to. If we were to address that person, we could refer to that person as *you*. Therefore, the assumed subject in imperative sentences (commands) is *you*, which we place inside

parentheses and add to the sentence. Yes, we cheat by adding an *assumed* subject that isn't really there.

- (You) **Ask** the questions that have no answers.

Subjects and Verbs in Interrogative Sentences

A common method of creating interrogative sentences (questions) is to move the subject from the left side of a helping verb to the right side of the helping verb.

Examples:

- **declarative:** Thad **has been sleeping** all day.
- **interrogative:** **Has** Thad **been sleeping** all day?

The subject “Thad” moves to the right of the helping verb “had.”

- **declarative:** We **are** spies in the land of the living.
- **interrogative:** **Are** we spies in the land of the living?

The subject “we” moves to the right of the helping verb “are.”

YOUR TURN 12

For each the following, first determine whether the sentence is imperative or interrogative (a command or a question). Then identify subjects and verbs. For imperative sentences, the (You) subject must be supplied.

1. Are you reliving the past?
2. Mend my life.
3. Love someone who doesn't deserve it.
4. Did they wear uniforms the color of a shriveled crab?

ANSWERS 12

1. **Are you reliving** the past? [**base sentence:** *you are reliving*]
2. (**You**) **Mend** my life. [**base sentence:** *you mend*]
3. (**You**) **Love** someone who doesn't deserve it. [**base sentence:** *you love*]
4. **Did they wear** uniforms the color of a shriveled crab? [**base sentence:** *they did wear*]

Lesson 13: Mixed Practice

Review: Sentences are built on foundations, and those foundations are subjects and verbs. Within each larger sentence lies a base sentence, consisting of subjects and verbs only.

We have looked at sentences through two different lenses: the complete subject/predicate lens and the simple subject/verb lens. We have practiced identifying subjects and verbs in sentences. We have learned to eliminate various words and word groups to simplify our task of identifying subjects and verbs. And we have examined various sentence patterns that do not fit the conventional subject-then-verb pattern.

This exercise will provide us an opportunity to show what we've learned.

YOUR TURN 13

For each of the following, identify the base sentence. The base sentence consists of nothing but the simple subject and the verb.

example: See who will answer!

answer: base sentence: you see

example: Maru Mori has been bringing me pairs of socks.

answer: base sentence: Maru Mori has been bringing

example: Are you lying down under the weight of humbleness?

answer: base sentence: you are lying

The number of words in the base sentence appears in parentheses.

1. On Lenox swayed the jazzman. (2)
2. Danger and darkness may accompany us on our pilgrimage. (4)
3. A youth who was wearing a red cap leaped to her side and snatched the bandage. (3)
4. The lashes had been dissolved by the oozy eyelids. (4)
5. A swallow shouldn't spend all its time singing. (*Unpack the contraction.*) (3)
5. A brisk breeze might have been covering all in darkness. (5)
7. Your howls of bewilderment will echo with the mountain winds. (3)
3. The drums, the traps, the banjos, the horns, and the tin cans can make two people fight on the top of a stairway and scratch each other's eyes in a clinch on the stairs. (8)
3. Stones have stood for a thousand years and have found the honey of peace in old poems. (5)
10. Give me a chainless soul with courage to endure. (2)
11. The dark cloud on the ends of your wings soars toward us. (2)
12. Did your father beg for mercy in the kitchen? (3)

ANSWERS 13

1. ~~On Lenox~~ **swayed** (the jazzman). [**base sentence:** *jazzman swayed*]
2. Danger and darkness **may accompany** us on our pilgrimage. [**base sentence:** *danger, darkness may accompany*]
3. (A youth ~~who was wearing a red cap~~) **leaped** ~~to her side~~ and **snatched** the bandage. [**base sentence:** *youth leaped, snatched*]
4. (The lashes) **had been dissolved** by the oozy eyelids. [**base sentence:** *lashes had been dissolved*]
5. (A swallow) **shouldn't spend** all its time singing. [**base sentence:** *swallow should spend*]
5. (A brisk breeze) **might have been covering** all in darkness. [**base sentence:** *breeze might have been covering*]
7. (Your howls ~~of bewilderment~~) **will echo** with the mountain winds. [**base sentence:** *howls will echo*]
3. (The drums), (the traps), (the banjos), (the horns), and (the tin cans) **can make** two people fight ~~on the top of a stairway~~ and **scratch** each other's eyes in a clinch on the stairs. [**base sentence** *drums, traps, banjos, horns, cans can make, scratch*]
3. Stones **have stood** ~~for a thousand years~~ and **have found** the honey of peace in old poems. [**base sentence:** *stones have stood, have found*]
10. (You) **Give** me a chainless soul with courage to endure. [**base sentence:** *you give*]
11. (The dark cloud ~~on the ends of your wings~~) **soars** toward us. [**base sentence:** *cloud soars*]
12. **Did** (your father) **beg** for mercy in the kitchen? [**base sentence:** *father did beg*]

Lesson 14: Subject-Verb Agreement, Part 1

Subjects must **agree** with verbs in two ways:

1. In **person**: The first-person subject *I* **agrees** with the verb *speaks*; the third-person subject *she* **agrees** with the verb *speaks*. [I speak; she speaks]
2. In **number**: The singular subject *she* **agrees** with the verb *speaks*; the plural subject *they* **agrees** with the verb *speak*. [she speaks; they speak]

If a writer were to make an **agreement** error, that error would more likely be an error of **number** rather than an error of **person**. For that reason, our study of **subject-verb agreement** will focus on issues of number.

When we refer to a subject's number, we are simply referring to the fact that subjects are singular or plural. *Door, hut, and rock* are singular; *doors, huts, and rocks* are plural.

As for verbs, they are not inherently singular or plural; however, they can be classified as singular or plural based on which subjects they agree with. Singular verbs agree with singular subjects; plural verbs agree with plural subjects.

Study these examples:

- The rainbow **shows** our journey's end.
- The rainbows **show** our journey's end.

By focusing on the -s endings, we can formulate a rule: with singular agreement (in most cases), the -s attaches to the verb; with plural agreement, the -s attaches to the subject.

- The rainbow **shows** our journey's end. [“Rainbow” is singular; the “-s” attaches to the verb “shows.”]
- The rainbows **show** our journey's end. [“Rainbows” is plural; the “-s” attaches to the noun “rainbows.”]

Let's now turn our attention to those sentence patterns that may cause errors in **agreement**. The first type of **agreement** error we'll turn our attention to is

the error that results from identifying the wrong subject.

Example:

- A blue spurt from the lighted matches (illuminate, illuminates) the room.

In sentences like the one above, errors can result when our ear—our innate sense of hearing what sounds right—deceives us. When we hear the noun *matches* next to the verb *illuminate*, our ear hears agreement.

This is where our skill in identifying subjects comes into play.

- (A blue spurt) ~~from the lighted matches~~ (illuminate, **illuminates**) the room.

The agreement does not lie in *matches illuminate*, but in *spurt illuminates*. But to make the proper subject-verb connection, we must first eliminate the prepositional phrase *from the lighted matches*. By doing so, we eliminate the noun *matches* as a potential subject.

YOUR TURN 14

Each of the following sentences is designed to lead your ear into fooling you—as would have been the case above had you heard the agreement of *matches* with *illuminate*. You, of course, will create correct agreement by forcing your ear to hear the actual subject paired with the correct verb.

Use the subject-verb identification skills we have learned. In particular, be certain to eliminate prepositional phrases and relative clauses that might interfere with identifying the proper subject.

example: The chief of all the area's tribes (refuse, refuses) to turn men into wolves and swine.

answer: The chief ~~of all the area's tribes~~ **refuses** to turn men into wolves and swine.

1. The voice that fills your ears with soft sounds (keep, keeps) you company on your journey.
2. The whistling sounds from the boat that sits deep within the harbor (call, calls) like a lost child in tears.
3. The object in the center of the circle of men (resemble, resembles) a silver tear, a tiny flame.
4. The hostages who must be rescued by the language of a poet (insist, insists) on revealing their mysteries.

ANSWERS 14

1. (~~The voice that fills your ears with soft sounds~~ **keeps** you company on your journey. [**base sentence:** *voice keeps*])
2. (~~The whistling sounds from the boat that sits deep within the harbor~~ **call** like a lost child in tears. [**base sentence:** *sounds call*])
3. (~~The object in the center of the circle of men~~ **resembles** a silver tear, a tiny flame. [**base sentence:** *object resembles*])
4. (~~The hostages who must be rescued by the language of a poet~~) **insist** on revealing their mysteries. [**base sentence:** *hostages insist*])

Lesson 15: Subject-Verb Agreement, Part 2

In the previous lesson, we saw how eliminating certain phrases and clauses helps us to properly identify the subject, which in turn helps us to select the verb that agrees with the subject. Now we'll look at two other situations that lead to subject-verb agreement difficulties: **compound subjects** and **there-expletives**.

Compound Subjects

Compound subjects are plural.

Example:

- The missing oars and the overturned kayak (*hint, hints*) at foul play.

Like the sentences in Lesson 14, the sentence above is designed to lead our language-detection ear into betraying us. Because the singular *kayak* appears directly next to the verb *hint*, our ear might lead us into hearing *kayak hints* as correct. But with **compound subjects**, we must remember that we treat *two* subjects as plural:

- The missing oars and the overturned kayak (**hint**, hints) at foul play.

When in doubt, mentally replace the **compound subject** with a phrase like *two things*.

- Two things **hint**.

There-Expletives

To avoid agreement errors in sentences beginning with *there*-expletives, we must note the following:

1. *There* is not the subject of the sentence.
2. The actual subject will be found to the right of the verb.

Example:

- There (is, are) many good games that are rule governed.

Again, the trick is to avoid being fooled by what we hear. In an expletive construction, we might hear the words *there* and *is* as sounding correct. But because *there* is not the subject of the sentence, we can eliminate it. Looking further to the right, we discover the actual subject of the sentence—*games*. Now our ear can hear *games are* as sounding correct.

- **There are** (many good games ~~that are rule-governed~~). [*games are*]

YOUR TURN 15

Once again, the following sentences (two containing compound subjects, two containing *there*-expletives) are designed to fool your ear into hearing subject-verb agreement errors as correct. For each, determine the subject and the correct verb. Use all of the subject-verb identification skills we have learned.

1. There (is, are) several salt shakers on the shelf.
2. The huts and the long journey (remain, remains) in my memory.
3. The twiggy bushes and the small dead tree (call, calls) for the approaching spring.
4. There (is, are) too many voices in the room.

ANSWERS 15

1. There **are** (several salt shakers) ~~on the shelf~~. [*shakers are*]
2. The huts and the long journey **remain** in my memory. [*two things remain*]
3. The twiggy bushes and the small dead tree **call** for the approaching spring.
[*two things call*]
4. There **are** (too many voices) ~~in the room~~. [*voices are*]

Lesson 16: Sentence Fragments

A complete sentence contains a subject and a verb. Anything less—like just a subject or just a predicate, for example—is a sentence **fragment**.

One good way to understand the concept of *fragment* is to imagine a person walking up to us, speaking, then walking away. If what that person speaks is a fragment, our reaction would be to call that person back and have that person finish what he or she was saying.

So imagine a person walking up and saying “the voices,” then walking away. Or saying “were shouting their bad advice,” then walking away. Or saying “though the voices around you were shouting their bad advice,” then walking away.

In each case, we know that the speaker has not delivered a complete thought, a complete sentence. And notice that we don’t need to run the speaker’s words through some sort of internal grammar checker. Instead, we innately understand when a word group is complete and when it is not.

An unintentional fragment is a serious error. It sends the message *I’m not really clear about what a sentence is*—a message we want to avoid sending. Our goal is to become aware of fragments and to avoid using those of the unintentional variety in our writing.

There are two ways to fix a fragment:

- add words
- delete a word

Adding Words

- **fragment:** Flings her hair down.

This word group is a predicate without a subject and, therefore, a **fragment**. We can fix this **fragment** by adding words—*a girl*, for instance.

- **sentence:** A girl flings her hair down.

Here is another example:

- **fragment:** The whole world.

This word group is a subject without a predicate and, therefore, a **fragment**. We can fix this **fragment** by adding words—*conforms to seventeen syllables*, for instance.

- **sentence:** The whole world conforms to seventeen syllables.

Deleting a Word

- **fragment:** Although a carriage flashed before them.

This fragment is less simplistic than the two previous examples. It contains a subject (*carriage*) and a verb (*flashed*), yet it cannot stand alone. The problem is the subordinating conjunction *although* which, when added to what would otherwise have been a complete sentence, reduces that sentence to a fragment.

So let's remove it.

- **sentence:** A carriage flashed before them.

Here is another example:

- **fragment:** That I went into the forest.

Once again, we have a fragment that contains a subject (*I*) and a verb (*went*), yet it cannot stand alone. The problem is the word *that* which, when added to what would otherwise have been a complete sentence, reduces the sentence to a fragment.

So let's remove it.

- **sentence:** I went into the forest.

YOUR TURN 16

Decide how you would fix the six sentence fragments that follow. Turn each into a complete sentence. For numbers 1-3, add one or more words; for numbers 4-6, delete a word.

1. The duty she had failed to perform.
2. Began shouting at the branches.
3. Beside the distant river.
4. When night fell.
5. That I might cross that bridge.
6. If there comes a dissenting voice.

POSSIBLE ANSWERS 16

1. The duty she had failed to perform would haunt her in the years to come.
[*a predicate was added*]
2. The apparition began shouting at the branches. [*a subject was added*]
3. Beside the distant river we saw the tents being taken down. [*a subject and a predicate were added*]
4. Night fell. [~~when~~]
5. I might cross that bridge. [~~that~~]
5. There comes a dissenting voice. [~~if~~]

Lesson 17: Run-On Sentences

In the previous exercise we learned that unintentional sentence fragments constitute a major writing error. In this exercise, we'll learn that the same is true of **run-on sentences**. Run-ons go by several names—names such as *comma fault*, *comma splice*, and *fused sentence*. However, we will simplify our study by placing all run-ons into a single category.

Here are a pair of sentences:

- Two roads diverged in a wood. I took the one less traveled by.

The writer of these sentences understands that the word *wood* is the last word of the first sentence and therefore places a period after the word *wood*. The same is true after the word *by* in the second sentence. A run-on occurs when a writer fails to understand that a sentence is concluding and fails to use a proper end-of-sentence punctuation mark, like a period.

Examples:

- Two roads diverged in a wood, I took the one less traveled by.
- Two roads diverged in a wood I took the one less traveled by.

In the first case, we have a comma trying to do the work of a period; in the second case, the period is simply not there. In both cases, a run-on sentence has been created.

Here is a quick overview:

- **fragment**: not enough; less than a sentence
- **sentence**: just right; correct
- **run-on**: too much; more than a sentence

When we write, the sentence is the building block of the prose we create. A lack of clarity about the meaning of *sentence* leads to fragments, run-ons, or both. Though fragments and run-ons seem quite different, both are considered **sentence-boundary errors**.

YOUR TURN 17

For each of the following, first determine whether the word group is a sentence, a run-on, or a fragment. (There are two of each.) Then, for the run-ons and fragments, decide whether you would fix the error by adding words, deleting a word, or adding or changing punctuation.

1. A long and silent street.
2. A young foot soldier stands on battle-pocked land his helmet is at a jaunty tilt.
3. Before he removed the iron sliver.
4. I feel above me the day-blind stars.
5. It was already late enough, the road was full of fallen branches and stones.
5. We forgot to notice who pulled his golden strings.

ANSWERS 17

1. A long and silent street. **fragment**

possible solution: *We found ourselves upon a long and silent street.*

2. A young foot soldier stands on battle-pocked land his helmet is at a jaunty tilt. **run-on**

possible solution: Place a period after *land* and capitalize the word *his*.

3. Before he removed the iron sliver. **fragment**

possible solution: *He removed the iron sliver.*

4. I feel above me the day-blind stars. **sentence**

5. It was already late enough, the road was full of fallen branches and stones. **run-on**

possible solution: Place a period after *enough* and capitalize the word *the*.

5. We forgot to notice who pulled his golden strings. **sentence**

Lesson 18: Exception #1— Intentional Fragments

Fragments are errors when they are unintentional. However, there is such a thing as an **intentional fragment**. Intentional fragments can help us create *voice* or *style*.

There is nothing accidental about the intentional fragment. Experienced writers know the difference between those that are intentional and those that are not.

Here are some examples of intentional fragments. The fragments are underlined:

- Something there is in me that detests a wall. Or a fence, a reservation, or golf course.
- Laertes has groupies, proof he has taste, has cool. Wears skate-board clothes.
- But that's how life parachutes to my home. Home, where they make you do what you don't want to do.

And here are some examples of writers using two or three consecutive fragments. The fragments are once again underlined:

- Seems like a long time since the waiter took my order. Grimy little luncheonette. The snow falling outside.
- We gobbled cotton candy torches, sweet as furtive kisses, shared on benches beneath summer shadows. Cherry. Elm. Sycamore.
- And Mrs. Whitmore was now reading from the Psalms. Coughing into her handkerchief. Snow above the windows.

Writers who use intentional fragments must have a good ear for language. When used well, intentional fragments provide writing with some dramatic punch, as in the examples above.

YOUR TURN 18

Try your hand at creating intentional fragments in the following sentences by using the parenthetical prompts.

1. She woke me up at dawn, her suitcase like a little brown dog at her heels. And a bus ticket was in her hand. (Turn the second sentence into an intentional fragment by removing one word.)
2. I had everything: sunlight safe inside the leaves of cottonwoods, pure harmonies of church music, echoes of slave songs, scraps of candy wrappers. I had everything. (Turn the second sentence into an intentional fragment by removing two words.)
3. I like the generosity of numbers. I like the way, for example, they are willing to count anything or anyone. (Turn the second sentence into an intentional fragment by removing two words.)
4. Meet me at the Vietnamese café, with its oily light, its odors whose colorful shapes are like flowers. There you will hear laughter and talking. There you will hear the tick of chopsticks. (Turn the second and third sentences into intentional fragments by removing four words from each.)

ANSWERS 18

1. She woke me up at dawn, her suitcase like a little brown dog at her heels.
A bus ticket was in her hand.
2. I had everything: sunlight safe inside the leaves of cottonwoods, pure harmonies of church music, echoes of slave songs, scraps of candy wrappers. I had Everything.
3. I like the generosity of numbers. I like The way, for example, they are willing to count anything or anyone.
4. Meet me at the Vietnamese café, with its oily light, its odors whose colorful shapes are like flowers. There you will hear Laughter and talking.
There you will hear The tick of chopsticks.

Lesson 19: Exception #2—Sentences in a Series

We will now visit a rather peculiar rule of punctuation. Study the following:

- Sentence. Sentence. (correct)
- Sentence, sentence. (incorrect—run-on)
- Sentence, sentence, sentence. (correct—sentences in a series)

If we start with a sentence and then add a comma-plus-a-sentence, we've gone too far: we've created a run-on. But if we take that run-on and add *another* comma-plus-a-sentence, we've come up with a stylish little gem of a sentence.

Peculiar, indeed.

This device borrows the punctuation usually reserved for listing smaller word groups (known as *items in a series*) and repurposes the device to accommodate a series of complete sentences: ***sentences in a series***.

- **common items in a series:** For breakfast I had waffles, strawberries, and walnuts.
- **sentences in a series:** I had waffles for breakfast, I had strawberries for lunch, I had walnuts for dinner.

Writers using sentences in a series should note the following:

- Each sentence in the series needs to be short and to the point. Longer sentences in a series are unlikely to work well.
- Writers are not limited to three sentences. Any number of sentences beyond three is possible.
- With common items in a series, we commonly place a conjunction (usually *and*) just prior to the final item. But with sentences in a series, it is better to leave the conjunction out.

Here are two more examples:

- All songs end, memories soar over rooftops, an eyelid swells with desire.
- A star flares on a medallion, a ball rolls out of reach, the glowing line

onscreen goes flat, an anonymous bullet strays. (*Here we have a four-sentence series.*)

YOUR TURN 19

In this Your Turn you'll try your skill at creating sentences in a series.

1. April gives to May, out come the flowers now, *add a third sentence of your own.*
2. For death in war is done by hands, suicide has cause, *add a third sentence of your own.*
3. And so the moss flourishes, the seaweed whips around, *add a third sentence, add a fourth sentence.*

POSSIBLE ANSWERS 19

1. April gives to May, out come the flowers now, it is time for spring.
2. For death in war is done by hands, suicide has cause, cancer blooms simply as a flower.
3. And so the moss flourishes, the seaweed whips around, the sea pushes through and rolls back, the rocks seem motionless.

Subjects and Verbs Glossary of Terms

active verb: A verb in an active sentence. In an active sentence, *actors* appear to the left of *actions*. In *Hank hit the ball*, the active verb is *hit*.

base sentence: The simple subject and verb of any sentence. The base sentence is a sentence reduced to its most essential parts.

compound subject: Two or more subjects performing the action of the verb, usually joined by the conjunction *and*.

compound verb: Two or more verbs naming two or more actions performed by the subject, usually joined by the conjunction *and*.

expletive construction: Expletives commonly begin with words such as *it*, *there*, or *here*—followed by a *to be* verb: *there are bats in the belfry*, for example. In such sentences, subjects will appear to the right of verbs.

identifying the subject: When determining the simple subject of a sentence, it is helpful to eliminate words and phrases that will not contain the subject of a sentence. These include articles, adjectives, prepositional phrases, relative clauses, and infinitives or infinitive phrases.

infinitive: The word *to* plus a verb: *to fly*, *to turn*, etc. Though infinitives are built from verb words, they do not function as verbs.

intentional fragment: Intentional fragments can help us create *voice* or *style*—but this must be done knowingly, not accidentally.

noun phrase: A group of words that functions as a noun. Simple subjects are often found on the right-hand side of noun phrases.

passive verb: The verb in a passive sentence. In a passive sentence, *actors* appear to the right of *actions*—if they appear at all. In *the ball was hit by Hank*, the passive verb is *was hit*. There is nothing wrong with passive construction; often they are helpful. But when they are arbitrary, choose the active over the passive.

phrasal verb: Most verbs consist of a single word; phrasal verbs are the

exception. Phrasal verbs include verbs such as *back up*, *calm down*, *get out*, *hand over*, *throw away*, and *try on*.

predicate: The words that (usually) appear to the right of the complete subject. Verbs are found within predicates.

prepositional phrase: A phrase that begins with a preposition and ends with the object of the preposition. Eliminating these phrases helps to reveal simple subjects.

relative clause: A word group that often intervenes between subjects and verbs. Eliminating these clauses (most begin with *who*, *that*, or *which*) helps to reveal simple subjects.

relative pronoun: A word that begins a relative clause. *Who*, *that*, and *which* are three common relative pronouns.

run-on sentence: Run-ons go by several names—names such as *comma fault*, *comma splice*, and *fused sentence*. Run-ons are errors (rarely are they intentional) that occur when writers fail to understand they have reached the end of a sentence and fail to punctuate accordingly.

sentence fragment: Less than a complete sentence. A fragment may be missing a subject, a verb, or both.

sentences in a series: A stylish configuration that allows us to string three or more short sentences together with commas.

subject: The primary noun in a sentence—usually the person or thing that performs the action described by the verb.

- **complete subject:** In most cases, the words appearing to the left of the verb.
- **simple subject:** Found within the complete subject. In most cases, this will be a one-word noun.

subject-verb agreement: Subjects and verbs must agree in number and person:

- **number:** Singular subjects go with singular verbs; plural subjects go with plural verbs: *One person swings; two people swing.*
- **person:** First-person subjects go with first-person verbs; third-person subjects go with third-person verbs: *I swing; she swings.*

types of sentences: We can categorize sentences based on complexity: simple, compound, complex, compound-complex. We can also categorize sentences based on function: declarative, exclamatory, imperative, and interrogative. With declarative sentences, subjects precede verbs, but sentences from the other three categories can scramble the customary subject-verb relationship. Imperative sentences, for example, have no subject at all and require us to supply the *assumed you* as the subject.

verb phrase: A main verb and its helping verbs. Assuming a main verb of one word, the longest verb phrase will be a phrase of four words.

- **main verb:** Usually a single word. Because main verbs take tense, we can test for main verbs with the test sentence “Today I BLANK; yesterday I BLANKED.”
- **helping verb:** One of 23 words that join up with main verbs to create verb phrases: *is, am, are, was, were, be, being, been, has, have, had, do, does, did, may, might, must, can, could, shall, should, will, would.*

verb: The word or words that tell what the subject does.

verbs before subjects: Standard English word order places subjects before verbs, but in a few configurations, verbs can appear to the left of subjects. Among these are sentences beginning with expletives and question-asking (interrogative) sentences.

Test Questions

Section 1: Subjects and Verbs

In Section 1, you are given eighteen sentences. Your job is to identify the simple subject (or subjects) and the verb in each sentence. If you were to perform each step we have learned in the preceding lessons, you would work methodically toward your goal by identifying the complete subject and the predicate, eliminating articles, prepositional phrases, relative clauses, and infinitives or infinitive phrases, and placing parentheses around noun phrases. But, ultimately, what matters is that you can determine the subjects and verbs—the base sentences that each of the eighteen sentences is built upon.

The test questions are subdivided into six groups of three sentences each. Answers follow immediately after each group of three.

TEST PART 1

1. A raging fire races across the floor of the valley.
2. A trail cut through the valley.
3. Bake loaves for the whole world.

TEST ANSWERS PART 1

1. (A raging fire) / **races** across the floor of the valley.

base sentence: *fire races*

2. (A trail) / **cut** through the valley.

base sentence: *trail cut*

3. (You) / **Bake** loaves for the whole world. [*imperative sentence: subject is assumed "you"*]

base sentence: *you bake*

TEST PART 2

4. By the road to the hospital blows the cold wind.
5. Have the enemies who were captured yesterday agreed to escape in silence?
5. The aging priest bows his head, lays a hand upon his knee, and reflects on the love of his parishioners.

TEST ANSWERS PART 2

4. ~~By the road to the hospital~~ **blows** (the cold wind). [*eliminate 2 prepositional phrases; the subject follows the verb*]

base sentence: *wind blows*

5. **Have** (the enemies) ~~who were captured yesterday~~ **agreed** to escape in silence? [*eliminate a relative clause; interrogative sentence: the verb is split*]

base sentence: *enemies have agreed*

5. (The aging priest) **bows** his head, **lays** a hand upon his knee, and **reflects** on the love of his parishioners. [*the verb is compound*]

base sentence: *priest bows, lays, reflects*

TEST PART 3

7. The auctioneer's confidence was inflating the bidding amounts.
3. The bobcat mingles with the chickens.
9. The brindled cows and the wings of the finches dot the land and color the sky.

TEST ANSWERS PART 3

7. (The auctioneer's confidence) **was inflating** the bidding amounts.

base sentence: *confidence was inflating*

3. (The bobcat) **mingles** with the chickens.

base sentence: *bobcat mingles*

3. (The brindled cows) and (the wings ~~of the finches~~) **dot** the land and **color** the sky. [*eliminate a prepositional phrase; the subject is compound; the verb is compound*]

base sentence: *cows, wings dot, color*

TEST PART 4

10. The chameleons that bask in the sun change their colors to remain unseen.
11. The child's hand from the peep hole might be blindly waving to remind us of the time.
12. The condor could be making the comeback of the century.

TEST ANSWERS PART 4

10. (The chameleons ~~that bask in the sun~~) **change** their colors to remain unseen. [*eliminate a relative clause*]

base sentence: *chameleons change*

11. (The child's hand ~~from the peep hole~~) **might be** blindly **waving** to remind us of the time. [*eliminate a prepositional phrase; an adverb sits within the verb*]

base sentence: *hand might be waving*

12. (The condor) **could be making** the comeback of the century.

base sentence: *condor could be making*

TEST PART 5

13. The crunching cow, the mouse, and the infidels regard the approaching miracle.
14. The egg of the wren and the singing toad favor the angels and adorn the parlors of heaven.
15. The graduates who write messages on their mortarboards sit in the back row.

TEST ANSWERS PART 5

3. (The crunching cow), (the mouse), and (the infidels) **regard** the approaching miracle. [*the subject is compound*]

base sentence: *cow, mouse, infidels regard*

4. (The egg of the wren) and (the singing toad) **favor** the angels and **adorn** the parlors of heaven. [*eliminate a prepositional phrase; the subject is compound; the verb is compound*]

base sentence: *egg, toad favor, adorn*

5. (The graduates who write messages on their mortarboards) **sit** in the back row. [*eliminate a relative clause*]

base sentence: *graduates sit*

TEST PART 6

6. The professors in the lounge discuss a controversial philosophical topic.
7. The true journey of your life requires a kind of madness.
8. These bits of gravel that cling to each knee bring me pain.

TEST ANSWERS PART 6

6. (The professors ~~in the lounge~~) **discuss** a controversial philosophical topic. [*eliminate a prepositional phrase*]

base sentence: *professors discuss*

7. (The true journey ~~of your life~~) **requires** a kind of madness. [*eliminate a prepositional phrase*]

base sentence: *journey requires*

8. (These bits ~~of gravel that cling to each knee~~) **bring** me pain. [*eliminate a prepositional phrase and a relative clause*]

base sentence: *bits bring*

Section 2: Fragments and Run-Ons

This section of the test consists of two subsections, each containing six sentences. Within each group of six, two sentences are complete and correct, two are fragments, and two are run-ons.

For the sentences that are complete and correct, simply identify them. For the other four sentences, determine whether they are fragments or run-ons. In addition, decide how you would fix these sentences.

TEST PART 7

1. Because it is so difficult for a deeper truth to make itself known. [*complete and correct? fragment? run-on?*]
2. The tools were at hand the time was now.
3. He was speckled with barnacles and tiny white sea-lice.
4. I was well upon my way to sleep before it fell, I could tell what form my dreaming was about to take.
5. The waste of broad, muddy fields.
5. This is the most compassionate act you can do for anyone.

TEST ANSWERS AND POSSIBLE ANSWERS PART 7

1. Because it is so difficult for a deeper truth to make itself known. [*fragment—either delete “because” or add a comma and a sentence after “known”*]
2. The tools were at hand the time was now. [*run-on—add a semicolon or a period and a capital letter after “hand”*]
3. He was speckled with barnacles and tiny white sea-lice. [*complete and correct*]
4. I was well upon my way to sleep before it fell, I could tell what form my dreaming was about to take. [*run-on—remove the comma after “fell” and add either a semicolon or a period and a capital letter*]
5. The waste of broad, muddy fields. [*fragment—words must be added; for example: “we trudged across the waste of broad, muddy fields”*]
5. This is the most compassionate act you can do for anyone. [*complete and correct*]

TEST PART 8

7. Even though most of us don't want to reach the end for a long time.
3. I love to stay in bed all morning with the covers thrown off and my eyes closed.
9. Life is kind of like a loathsome hag who is forever threatening to turn beautiful.
10. Night and day arrive, what is old remains old.
11. The air is drugged with blossoms deep in the night a pine cone falls.
12. The leaves shivering in the sun as if each day were the last.

TEST ANSWERS AND POSSIBLE ANSWERS PART 8

7. Even though most of us don't want to reach the end for a long time. [*fragment—either delete “even though” or add a comma and a sentence after “time”*]
3. I love to stay in bed all morning with the covers thrown off and my eyes closed. [*complete and correct*]
9. Life is kind of like a loathsome hag who is forever threatening to turn beautiful. [*complete and correct*]
10. Night and day arrive, what is old remains old. [*run-on—remove the comma after “arrive” and add either a semicolon or a period and a capital letter*]
11. The air is drugged with blossoms deep in the night a pine cone falls. [*run-on—add a semicolon or a period and a capital letter after “blossoms”*]
12. The leaves shivering in the sun as if each day were the last. [*fragment—either change “shivering” to “shiver” or add words; for example: “the leaves shivering in the sun as if each day were the last remind me of my own mortality”*]

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