

Identifying the Main Grammatical Structure of English Sentences

Contents

Contents	1
The Five Grammatically Complete Sentence Structures of the English Language	2
Finding the Main Sentence Structure in Compound and Complex Sentences	3
Finding the Main Sentence Structure in Sentences with Propositional Phrases	4
Why is Identifying the Main Sentence Important?	5
Conclusion	6

This document discusses the five main sentence structures of the English language and the importance of identifying the main sentence(s) within any compound or complex sentence. See the glossary for definitions of grammatical terms.



The Five Grammatically Complete Sentence Structures of the English Language

There are five grammatically complete sentence structures in the English language.

- Subject-Verb
 - Subject-Verb-Object
 - Subject-linking Verb-subject Complement
 - Subject-Verb-indirect Object-direct Object
 - Subject-Verb-direct Object-object Complement
-
1. **Subject-intransitive verb:**
 - a. Wilcox Writing helps.
 - b. S-V
 2. **Subject-transitive verb-direct object:**
 - a. Writing tutoring aids learners.
 - b. I learn writing.
 - c. S-V-O
 3. **Subject-linking verb-subject complement**
 - a. Wilcox Writing is personalized.
 - b. S-V-C_s
 4. **Subject-trans. verb-indirect object-direct object**
 - a. The learning document assists the learner's learning.
 - b. S-V-O_i-O_d
 5. **S-V-direct object-object complement**
 - a. Melissa called Wilcox Writing a blessing.
 - b. S-V-O_d-C_o

Everyone who has completed grade school has been taught that “every sentence should have the form subject-verb-object” if it is to be a grammatically complete sentence. This is partially correct. There are three grammatically complete sentence structures that have a subject, a verb, and an object. Yet, two grammatically complete sentence structures don't follow this rule. One sentence structure has the form subject-verb, and the other has the form subject-verb-subject complement. Both structures lack an object; Yet, they are still considered grammatically complete.



Finding the Main Sentence Structure in Compound and Complex Sentences

All grammatically complete simple sentences and independent clauses in the English language will have the structure of one of these five sentence structures. Although compound and complex sentences will be more than these five sentence structures, they can still be found within them. Consider the following compound and complex sentences.

Compound: I cooked breakfast, and the breakfast satiated my partner's hunger.

Complex: When revising for clarity, we scan for ambiguous pronouns.

Can you identify which of the five sentence structures appear in both sentences?

The compound sentence contains two independent clauses, and each independent clause has its own grammatically complete sentence structure. The first independent clause, "I cooked breakfast," follows the pattern of sentence structure 2. The second independent clause, "the breakfast satiated my partner's hunger," follows structure 4.

I cooked breakfast,

(subject-transitive verb-direct object)

and the breakfast satiated my partner's hunger.

(subject-transitive verb-indirect object-direct object)

In the first independent clause, the subject ("I") does some action (they "cooked"), and they directly cook some object ("breakfast"). In the second independent clause, the subject ("the breakfast") directly does some action ("satiated") to an object. Which object does it affect directly? It directly affects the "hunger," and so, this is the direct object. The other object, "my partner," receives the satiated hunger, the hunger which was directly acted on by the breakfast.

In the complex sentence, the phrase and dependent subordinating clause in the first part of the sentence, "When revising for clarity," is not a grammatically complete thought, as it lacks a subject. Thus, it doesn't have one of the five grammatically complete sentence structures. The dependent clause depends on the independent clause "we scan for ambiguous pronouns." It follows sentence structure 2.

we scan for ambiguous pronouns.

(subject-transitive verb-object)



Finding the Main Sentence Structure in Sentences with Propositional Phrases

Even in simple sentences, a main sentence might be layered with or split up by other words or phrases. For instance, in complex sentences, dependent clauses can split up independent clauses. Nonetheless, we will always find one of the five main sentence structures if the sentence is grammatically complete. For instance, a sentence might be split up when adding prepositional phrases as a modifier within a sentence.

Wilcox Writing helps to make writing better.

“to make writing better” is the prepositional phrase here. Yet, the main sentence Subject- intransitive Verb is still present. Consider a more complex example:

I learn, with the help of Wilcox Writing’s writing services, writing.

Can you identify the main sentence here?

The main sentence is “I learn writing.” The phrase “through the help of Wilcox Writing” is a prepositional phrase and a nonessential clause.

I learn, with the help of Wilcox Writing’s writing services, writing.

As depicted in these two examples, sometimes main sentences can be split up or accompanied by other phrases and clauses. However, the main sentence dictates the main idea of the sentence. Everything else is extra information and a modifier for the main sentence. Identifying the main sentence is important to making writing clear and effective.

The important thing about main sentences is that we can leave out everything else that isn’t part of the main sentence and still have a good sentence. When sentences are long, we can export the extra information into a new sentence so that the extra information becomes a main sentence of its own.



Why is Identifying the Main Sentence Important?

Identifying the main sentence(s) of any complex or compound sentence can help us with clarity in our writing. It also helps us identify grammatical errors. This section contains several instances of how identifying the main sentence can help identify grammatical errors.

When we have a grammar error with a dangling or misplaced modifier, we can correct it by identifying what parts of the sentence are part of the main sentence. Consider the following dangling modifier grammar error.

Shooting the bow, the target was hit.

What is the main sentence in this example?

The main sentence is “The target was hit.” The dangling modifier is “shooting the bow.”

Once we identify the main sentence, we can rearrange everything else. In general, keeping main sentences together aids in clarity and ease of reading, since it lowers cognitive load.

Further, main sentences can help us improve subject-verb agreement problems, which can arise when the main sentence is split up. Consider the following example where there is no subject-verb agreement.

Lilly, a fan of ducks, walk down to the river.

The main sentence here is “Lilly walk down to the river.” We can see the issue when we write the main sentence out without any additions. The proper form is

Lilly, a fan of ducks, walks down to the river.

The proper main sentence is “Lilly walks down to the river.”

We might easily be confused if we read the sentence quickly and think “oh, well ducks walk. Right?” That sounds grammatical. However, the “walk” is a verb done by Lilly, not the ducks. The “a fan of ducks” is a nonessential clause and not the main sentence. Thus, it’s important to always identify and read the main sentence for correct subject-verb agreement.



Conclusion

There are five main grammatically complete sentence structures of the English language, and identifying them can help us improve grammar in our writing. It can help with subject-verb agreement and preventing sentence fragments (a sentence lacking one main part of one of the five structures). It also helps improve clarity in writing by seeing which parts are essential to a sentence, and we can edit for clarity by removing nonessential parts of a sentence or modifiers that break up a main sentence structure. By seeing these sentence structures, we can also read other writings better because we can see the main structure and idea of any sentence.

For practice with identifying the main sentence structures of sentences, find any reading of your choice (news articles, websites, etc.) and try to identify the main sentences in any of the passages.

For more writing documents and to get help with your writing, visit www.wilcoxwriting.ca. We offer personalized writing tutoring. By also subscribing to our newsletter, you get access to our Writing Center and free writing documents.



Glossary

Complex sentence: A sentence with an independent clause and one or more dependent, or subordinate, clauses.

Compound sentence: A sentence with two or more independent clauses.

Dependent clause: A phrase that is not a grammatically complete sentence and must be contained in a sentence that has at least one independent clause. It depends on that clause for the sentence to be grammatically complete. A group of words that contain a subject and predicate and cannot stand on its own.

Direct object: The verb acts on the direct object.

Independent clause: A clause that can stand on its own as a grammatically complete sentence.

Indirect object: An indirect object is a receiver of the direct object. E.g. The ball hits the *wall*. The (direct object) hits the (indirect object).

Intransitive verb: There is no receiver of an action of the verb. The action is not done to anything, but a subject does the action.

Linking verb: A linking verb ‘links’ the subject complement back to the subject. E.g., “is”: Sarah *is* overjoyed.

Nonessential clause: A phrase that isn’t essential to understand the meaning of the sentence or noun it modifies and can be left out of the sentence without affecting meaning.

Object complement: An object complement says something about the object.

Prepositional phrase: A modifier containing a preposition + optional modifiers + object (noun, pronoun, or gerund) that functions as an adverb or adjective.

Simple sentence: A sentence with only one independent clause.

Subject complement: A complementary word or phrase that says something about the subject. E.g., Sarah *is overjoyed*.

Transitive verb: There is a receiver for the verb, or the subject is acting on something. The action is done to something or someone, and the main subject does this action to a direct object or another subject.

