WRITING CENTER WORKSHOP

UNDERSTANDING THE SENTENCE

We express our thoughts in writing through sentences where the main idea is connected to an action or linked with other words to state a thought. In English the sentence is basic to human communication. By understanding how a sentence works, you not only avoid making mistakes but create writing that is fresh, interesting, and easy to read.

A sentence is a group of words that contains a subject and a verb and states a complete thought. The two most important parts of any sentence are the subject and verb. The subject is the person or main topic that explains what the sentence is about. Subjects, which generally appear at the beginning of the sentence, may be a single word, several words, or a phrase.

Tanya drives a school bus.

Tanya and Eric drive school buses.

Success makes some people nervous.

Subjects are either nouns or pronouns.

Nouns are names of people, places, ideas or things.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People</th>
<th>Places</th>
<th>Ideas</th>
<th>Things</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>doctor</td>
<td>basement</td>
<td>liberty</td>
<td>television</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parents</td>
<td>plane</td>
<td>fear</td>
<td>nickel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nouns may be common or proper. Common nouns refer to general people, places, ideas, or things and are not capitalized. Proper nouns refer to specific people, places, ideas, or things and are capitalized.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>common nouns</th>
<th>proper nouns</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>college</td>
<td>NorthWest Arkansas Community College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>town</td>
<td>Bentonville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>actor</td>
<td>Alec Baldwin</td>
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<tr>
<td>drugstore</td>
<td>Walgreens</td>
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Pronouns, which take the place of a noun, may also be the subject of a sentence.

Personal pronouns – I, you, he, she, it, we, they

Demonstrative pronouns – this, that, these, those

Indefinite pronouns – everyone, someone, no one, somebody, both, all, many

Before attempting to locate the subject of a sentence, remove all prepositional phrases. The subject of a sentence will not be found in a prepositional phrase.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prepositions</th>
<th>about</th>
<th>before</th>
<th>like</th>
<th>since</th>
<th>in</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>above</td>
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<td>under</td>
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<td>for</td>
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<td>with</td>
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<td>from</td>
<td>over</td>
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<td>within</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>around</td>
<td>inside</td>
<td>past</td>
<td></td>
<td>without</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Remove the prepositional phrases and find the subject of each sentence:
Before the play we talked about the characters. In the last production I thought the actors overlooked the humor in the first scene. The director sat on the stage and nodded.

Usually subjects appear at the beginning of a sentence. In the inverted sentence it comes near the end. The words there and here are never the subject of a sentence.

At the top of the hill flies an American flag.
There is someone waiting to see you.
Behind too many of these successful athletes is steroid use.
Where is your brother?

Possessive nouns and pronouns are not subjects.
The school’s policy angered both parents and students.
Sandy’s house needs painting.

Underline the subject in each sentence.
1. The White House is the official residence of the president of the United States.
2. It was designed by the Irish-born architect James Hoban.
3. Since Jefferson’s time, visitors have been allowed to tour the building.
4. Over the years, the building fell into disrepair.
5. There are many Americans who visit Washington annually.
6. A person’s social security number has become a national identity number.
7. How do you intend to pass the course?
8. Both James and George plan to transfer to the University of Arkansas.
VERBS

Verbs express action, link ideas, or help other verbs.

Action verbs show what the subject is doing.
- The doctor examined the X-rays.
- We rejected the director’s proposal.
- Italy introduced new techniques in motion pictures.

Linking verbs connect the subject to related ideas in the sentence. Linking verbs function much like an = sign. Instead of showing action they express a relationship between ideas. The verb to be is a linking verb. Tenses of this verb include am, are, is, was, were, has been, have been, will be.

- The bus was late.
- Ted is a translator.
- We are hopeful.

Verb phrases contain a helping verb and main verb.

- Sara should win at least one medal.
- You might assist me tonight.
- They are studying in the library.

EXERCISE ON SUBJECTS AND VERBS
Underline the subject once and the verb twice.

1. Here is a map of the subway route to the Bronx.
2. Where are the keys to the car?
3. On her desk is a new word processor.
4. Athletes and celebrities are frequently seen on television endorsing products.
5. Missionaries from Spain were arriving in California in the 1760s.
6. My parents are happy in their new apartment.
7. There are several reasons to explain his refusal.
8. A number of summer beach vacations have been ruined by stingray bites.
9. Mark Twain piloted a riverboat and later wrote several novels.
10. The warden of a jail in the northern part of Minnesota explained in an interview on television during the past week his position on the death penalty.