Grammar

Subjects and Verbs
The basic unit of writing is the simple sentence. A simple sentence expresses a complete thought. Every simple sentence must contain two basic building blocks: a subject and a verb. The subject is the main topic of the sentence—who or what the sentence is about. The verb says what the subject does.

Example of a simple sentence:
Donna bakes cupcakes for the New York Cupcake Café.

Subject: Who? Donna
Verb: What does Donna do? She bakes.

All sentences are built from subjects and verbs, so understanding how to find them is an important first step in mastering other sentence skills.

Find the Subject
When you write a sentence, you write about someone or something: the subject. To find the subject of a simple sentence, ask who or what the sentence is about. Subjects can be people, places, things, or ideas.

- Maddie eats cheese every day.
  Who? Maddie (person)
- Expensive restaurants intimidate me.
  What? Expensive restaurants (place)
Find the Verb

When writing about someone or something (the subject), to complete the thought you must write what the subject does: the verb. A verb often conveys the idea of action. To find the verb, ask what the subject does.

Action Verbs

Verbs often show action. These verbs are called action verbs. They tell us what somebody or something does.

- Maddie eats cheese every day.  
  *What does Maddie do? She eats.*
- Expensive restaurants intimidate me.  
  *What do expensive restaurants do? They intimidate.*

Linking Verbs

Some verbs, called linking verbs, do not show action. Instead, a linking verb connects a noun in front of the verb with a word or group of words that comes after it. In doing so, the linking verb tells something about the subject: what the subject is or was.

Some Common Linking Verbs

- am  
- be  
- feel  
- is  
- become  
- seem  
- are  
- look  
- was  
- appear  
- were

- Pizza *is* my favorite food. (connects *pizza* with *favorite food*)
- Your outfit *looks* good. (connects *outfit* with *good*)

Prepositional Phrases

A prepositional phrase is a group of words beginning with a part of speech called a preposition and ending with a noun. Writers often use prepositional phrases to show time or location, as in before the game, during the party, below the table, or inside the box.

Common Prepositions

- about  
- behind  
- despite  
- in  
- onto  
- until  
- above  
- before  
- down  
- inside  
- over  
- up  
- across  
- beneath  
- during  
- into  
- through  
- upon  
- after  
- beside  
- except  
- of  
- to  
- with  
- around  
- between  
- for  
- off  
- toward  
- within  
- at  
- by  
- from  
- on  
- under  
- without
The subject never appears within a prepositional phrase, so you should ignore prepositional phrases when looking for the subject of a sentence. In the examples below, the prepositional phrases are crossed out.

- Through the night, we heard a strange tapping sound.
  Subject: Who? We
  Verb: What did we do? We heard.

- The music at the party was boring.
  Subject: What? The music
  Verb: What about the music? It was.

**Helping Verbs and Verb Phrases**

Both action and linking verbs often are accompanied by other special verbs called **helping verbs**. Helping verbs frequently show time. Listed below are some frequently used helping verbs.

**Helping Verbs**

- can
- might
- should
- could
- must
- used to
- have
- need
- will
- may
- shall

Main verbs accompanied by one or more helping verbs are called **verb phrases**. For example, following are some verb phrases formed by adding helping verbs to the main verb learn:

**Helping Verbs and Verb Phrases**

- is learning has learned should have learned
- was learning will learn should have been learned
  - had been learning had learned
  - has been learned should have been learning

Below are sentences that contain verb phrases:

- Eliza will be moving to Washington next week.
  Subject: Who? Eliza
  Verb phrase: What about her? She will be moving.

- We should have left hours ago.
  Subject: Who? We
  Verb phrase: What about us? We should have left.
Fragments
A word group that lacks a subject or a verb and that does not show a complete thought is called a fragment. Because fragments are incomplete thoughts punctuated as complete ones, they can confuse readers and must be avoided. One key to eliminating fragments from your writing is knowing the difference between two types of word-groups: phrases and clauses.

Phrases and Clauses
A group of words without a subject/verb unit is called a phrase. A group of words with a subject/verb unit is called a clause.

- Phrase (Fragment):
  My relatives in Chicago. (no verb)
  Clause:
  My relatives live in Chicago. (contains a subject, relatives, and a verb, live)

- Phrase (Fragment):
  Rounding the corner. (no subject)
  Clause:
  A red convertible was rounding the corner.
  (contains a subject, convertible, and a complete verb phrase, was rounding)

Independent and Dependent Clauses
Though clauses contain both a subject and a verb, that does not mean that all clauses are complete sentences. There are two types of clauses: independent clauses and dependent clauses.

A clause that can stand alone as a complete sentence is called an independent clause.

A dependent clause cannot stand alone. Dependent clauses always start with a word called a subordinator. Words like although and since are subordinators. Because they are incomplete thoughts, dependent clauses must be attached to independent clauses.

Common Subordinators
after if until wherever
although in order that what whether
as since whatever which
because that when while
before though whenever who
even though unless where whose

For example:

- Independent Clause:
  Dwane likes professional basketball.

- Dependent Clause (Fragment):
  Although Dwane likes professional basketball.

- Correction:
  Although Dwane likes professional basketball, he enjoys watching football even more. (attached dependent clause)
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Independent Clause:
Richard came home for summer vacation.
Dependent Clause (Fragment):
Since Richard came home for summer vacation.
Correction:
Since Richard came home for summer vacation, he has not done a single thing. (attached dependent clause)

Correcting Fragments
Sentence fragments are phrases or dependent clauses punctuated as if they were complete sentences. Fragment literally means a “part broken off.” In keeping with this definition, a sentence fragment can usually be fixed by attaching the fragment to a sentence. Thus, the “broken part” is glued back to its original position.

For example:

Phrase (Fragment):
Stanley has no patience for people. Especially his sister-in-law Blanche.
Correction:
Stanley has no patience for people, especially his sister-in-law Blanche.

Dependent Clause (Fragment):
Because Donna took so long to get ready. We all missed the first act of the play.
Correction:
Because Donna took so long to get ready, we all missed the first act of the play.

Hints on Proofreading for Fragments
Focus on each sentence separately, reading slowly. Do not be tempted to skim over your work.

Try reading out loud when you are trying to decide whether a group of words is complete or incomplete. You can often “hear it” when something is incomplete.

Learn to identify phrases and dependent clauses in writing. If you see a word group that is unattached, you know it must be a fragment.

What Are Run-on Sentences?
While some writers make the mistake of not putting enough information in a sentence, resulting in sentence fragments, others try to cram too much into their sentences. Run-on sentences result when two complete sentences (independent clauses) are joined with either no punctuation or only a comma. This construction makes it unclear where one thought ends and the next one begins.

Like fragments, run-ons cause readers to become confused. People often write run-ons when they sense that two thoughts belong together logically but do not realize that the two thoughts are separate sentences grammatically, as in the following examples.

Run-on:
Dave and Rhonda are crazy about figure skating they watch it on television constantly.

Run-on:
Dave and Rhonda are crazy about figure skating, they watch it on television constantly.

Correction:
Dave and Rhonda are crazy about figure skating. They watch it on television constantly.

Generally, good writers will often join sentences which are logically related to make a more complex point. However, complete sentences cannot be joined with just a comma or no punctuation at all.
Correcting Run-on Sentences

Following are three useful ways to correct run-ons:

- Make two separate sentences of the run-on thoughts by inserting a period and a capital letter.
  Dave and Rhonda are crazy about figure skating. They watch it on television constantly.

- Use a comma plus a coordinating conjunction (and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet) to connect the two complete thoughts.
  Coordinating conjunctions are joining words that, when used with a comma, show the logical connection between two closely related thoughts.
  Dave and Rhonda are crazy about figure skating, so they watch it on television constantly.

- Use a subordinator. You can also show the relationship between two sentences by using a subordinator (words like after, because, and although) to change one of them into a dependent clause.
  Because Dave and Rhonda are crazy about figure skating, they watch it on television constantly.

Common Subordinators

- after
- even though
- unless
- whenever
- although
- if
- until
- where
- as
- in order that
- what
- wherever
- because
- since
- whatever
- whether
- before
- though
- when
- while

Words That Often Lead to Run-on Sentences

Frequently the second sentence in a run-on begins with one of the words in the following table. These words often refer to something in the first sentence or seem like joining words. Beware of run-ons whenever you use one of these words in your writing.

Words That Often Lead to Run-ons

- I
- we
- there
- now
- you
- they
- this
- then
- he
- that
- next
- she
- it  

Making Subjects and Verbs Agree

Being able to identify subjects and verbs is important. But you must also make sure that the subjects and verbs agree in number. This grammatical rule is called subject-verb agreement.

- A singular subject (one person or one thing) is used with a singular verb.
  For example:
  Her habit annoys me. (singular)
  The plane was late. (singular)
A plural subject (more than one person or thing) is used with a plural verb.

For example:

Her habits annoy me. (plural)
The planes were late. (plural)

Writers sometimes make mistakes in subject-verb agreement in sentences with more than one subject—a compound subject—or with verbs separated from subjects. It’s also common for writers to confuse subject-verb agreement when using pronouns (I, you, he, she, it, we, you, and then), either/or, neither/nor connectors, or “there” sentences. Examples of these follow in this topic.

**Compound Subjects**

Subjects joined by and are typically paired with a plural verb. These are called compound subjects. The only exception to this rule would be subjects considered singular because they are taken as a single unit, such as Rock ‘n’ Roll.

For example:

John and Tina are very close. (plural)
Corned beef and cabbage is my favorite meal. (singular)
Hot cocoa and a good book make Sandra happy. (plural)
Hide-and-seek is played by almost all children. (singular)

**Verbs Separated from Subjects**

When words, such as prepositional phrases, come between the subject and verb, the interrupting words do not change subject-verb agreement. The verb still must agree with the subject of the sentence.

For example:

The coins on the table are mine. (plural)
The price of the dining room chairs is ridiculous. (singular)
That woman with plaid bell bottoms seems strange. (singular)
Those shirts, as well as that coat, need a thorough cleaning. (plural)

**Punctuation**

**Commas**

Writers use commas to mark slight pauses or breaks in sentences. When used properly, commas clarify meaning in a sentence. When overused, however, commas can interrupt the smooth flow of sentences and cause confusion. Whenever you add a comma to a sentence, you should be conscious of the specific comma usage rule you are applying. All good writers should know the six primary comma rules covered in this topic.

1. Use a comma after an introductory word or word group that leads into the main sentence.
   - Strolling down the nature trail, Zac saw a brown bear.
   - When you have finished eating your broccoli, you may leave the table.

A dependent clause that comes at the beginning of a sentence always needs to be followed by a comma. The second example above illustrates this concept. However, if the dependent clause comes at the end of the sentence, no comma is necessary:

- You may leave the table when you have finished eating your broccoli.
2. Use commas to enclose a word or word group that interrupts the flow of a sentence.
   - Jane, however, will not be coming tonight.
   - Richard, knowing that it was going to rain, bought a new umbrella.

If you are unsure whether Rule 2 applies to a sentence, try reading the sentence without the interrupting word or words. If the sentence still makes sense without the missing material, set off the interrupting expression with commas. Note how nonessential information is set off with commas in the following example:
   - Marty Lasorda, who sat next to me in high school, is now a trader on Wall Street.

The words who sat next to me in high school are added information and not needed to identify the subject of the sentence, Marty Lasorda. However, in the next sentence the added information is necessary:
   - The guy who sat next to me in high school is now a trader on Wall Street.

The words who sat next to me in high school are essential to the sentence. Without them, we would have no idea to which guy the writer is referring.

3. Use commas to separate items in a series.
   - Steve ordered a large coke, large fries, and a double cheeseburger.
   - Tanya did her laundry, cleaned the bedroom, washed the dishes, and painted the kitchen on Sunday.

Use a comma between descriptive words in a series if and sounds natural between them, as in the following:
   - We immediately left the crowded, noisy restaurant.
     (We immediately left the crowded and noisy restaurant.)
   - Pablo wore an expensive, well-tailored suit to the party.
     (Pablo wore an expensive and well-tailored suit to the party.)

Notice, however, how commas are not necessary in the following sentences:
   - Brenda bit into a juicy red apple.
     Awkward:
     Brenda bit into a juicy and red apple.

In the above example and does not sound natural between descriptive words, so no comma is used.

4. Use a comma before the conjunctions and, but, for, or, nor, yet, or so when they connect two independent clauses.
   - Dwane thought he had enough money for the movie, but he was fifty cents short.
   - The running back broke through the line for a thirty yard gain, and the home crowd began cheering wildly.

5. Use commas around direct addresses.

When addressing a person, set off the person's name or title with commas. If the direct address comes at the beginning or end of a sentence, only one comma is necessary.
   - Ernest, your pants are on backwards.
   - Ladies and gentlemen, you are cordially invited to a reception after the show.

6. Use a comma to set off a direct quotation.

A comma separates what is said from who said it.
   - “Never tell me the odds,” said Han Solo.
   - “Seeing the movie version,” continued Samantha, “is never as good as reading the book.”
Possessive Apostrophes: Singular Nouns

The possessive form of a noun shows ownership—or possession. There are several ways to show ownership without changing the noun itself, such as:

- the sweater belonging to the girl
- the sweater of the girl

However, a simpler, more efficient way to show ownership is to change the possessive noun using a punctuation mark called an apostrophe (’):

- the girl’s sweater
- the test of the student = the student’s test
- the ending of the movie = the movie’s ending

Rule 1: To make a singular noun possessive, add an apostrophe and an s (’s).

- Be careful: Do not use ‘s when you are simply forming a plural.
- Incorrect: Barbecue short rib’s are the specialty here.
- Correct: Barbecue short ribs are the specialty here.

Possessive Apostrophes: Plural Nouns

A plural noun names two or more persons, places, things, or ideas. Most commonly a noun is made plural by adding an s: one girl becomes several girls; one book becomes several books. Making a plural noun ending in s possessive is simple:

Rule 2: To make a plural noun ending in s possessive, place an apostrophe after the s (’s).

- the tests of the students = the students’ tests
- the endings of the movies = the movies’ endings

Some nouns change their spellings to form the plural: child becomes children; woman becomes women, for example. To make this kind of plural noun possessive simply add an apostrophe and an s (’s).

- the children’s toys
- the women’s self defense class

Contractions

Sometimes writers combine two words to form a single shorter word. Such a construction is called a contraction. An apostrophe is added to show where letters have been omitted. For example:

- I + am = I’m (the apostrophe replaces the missing a)
- you + will = you’ll (the apostrophe replaces the missing w and i)

Here are some other common contractions:

cannot = can’t

did not = didn’t

do not = don’t

is not = isn’t

it is = it’s

let us = let’s

he is = he’s

she is = she’s

there is = there’s

they have = they’ve

was not = wasn’t

we are = we’re

we have = we’ve

will not = won’t
Be careful: The possessive form of the word *it* is *its*. Do not add an apostrophe to show possession in this case; *it’s* always means *it is* or *it has*.

- Vlada’s car blew out *its* right front tire. (possessive)
- The plant outgrew *its* pot. (possessive)
- *It’s* been a pleasure to meet you. (contraction: *it has*)
- I think *it’s* time to go home now. (contraction: *it is*)

**Other Punctuation Marks**

Punctuation is necessary to help make sentence meanings clearer. Commas and apostrophes are the most commonly misused punctuation marks. However, they are not the only marks that give writers trouble. Listed below are the rules for other punctuation marks that are used in writing.

**Period**

Use a *period* (.) at the end of all sentences except for direct questions and exclamations.

Use a period at the end of any indirect question.

- **Example:**
  
  John asked Beth why there were no cookies left.

Use a period after most abbreviations.

- **Example:**
  
  Dr.
  
  Ms.
  
  Jr.

**Question Mark**

Use a *question mark* (?) at the end of a direct question. But, as illustrated above, do not use a question mark to end an indirect question.

- **Examples:**
  
  How cold is it outside?
  
  When was the Civil War fought?
  
  John asked Beth, “Why are there no cookies left?”
  
  “Why are there no cookies left?” asked John.

**Exclamation Point**

An *exclamation point* (!) is used to at the end of a statement of strong feeling or after an interjection.

- **Example:**
  
  Look out for that truck!
  
  Hey! Somebody stole my wallet!
Colon

Use a colon (:) to introduce a list. The words that come before the colon must be a complete sentence.

Incorrect:
Two things that I hate are: rainy days and Sundays.

Correct:
There are two things that I hate: rainy days and Sundays.

A colon is used to help explain the statement that precedes the colon. It is also used to set off an explanation or final word.

Examples:
There are only two things I like to do on Sundays: go to the movies and have pizza for dinner.
We all had the same goal: success.
Use a colon after salutations in business correspondence, even if you address the person by their first name.

Examples:
Dear Ms. Smith:
Dear Verna:

Semicolon

A semicolon (;) is used to separate closely related independent clauses. Often the colon is used in place of the word because.

Example:
Sarah was excited about the party; she knew that Greg was going to be there.

Use a semicolon to separate items in a series when the items themselves contain commas.

Example:
There are four pizza toppings that I enjoy: pepperoni, sausage, and mushrooms; green peppers, onions, and olives; eggplant, garlic, and anchovies; and spinach, goat cheese, and sun-dried tomatoes.

Hyphens

Hyphenating documents has become much easier on the computer since you can automatically hyphenate the document, move the word to the next line, or compress the word to keep it on one line. However, hyphens have other functions, as discussed below.

Use a hyphen (-) to combine two nouns when they are acting as a singular, descriptive word. To see if the two words should be hyphenated into one descriptive word, ask yourself “what kind” of noun is being described.

Examples:
a three-legged dog (What kind of dog? three-legged)
a four-day convention (What kind of convention? four-day)

Incorrect:
I went to a convention that lasted four-days.
(Four days does not answer the question “what kind.”)

In writing, hyphenate the numbers twenty-one through ninety-nine and all fractions:

Examples:
thirty-three
one-half
Do not hyphenate three-word numbers.

- **Example:**
  
  four hundred five

Use a hyphen with the prefix *mid* when referring to time.

- **Example:**
  
  the mid-sixties

Do not hyphenate the prefix *mid* when referring to other things:

- **Example:**
  
  midlife crisis

Hyphenate the prefix *re* only for ease of reading.

- **Examples:**
  
  re-edited
  
  re-evaluated
  
  restated (no hyphen needed)

**Dashes**

Use a dash (—) to show a sudden break in thought or to set off parenthetical information. The dash is also called an em dash because it is about the width of a capital M.

Use an em dash (—) to interrupt a sentence or to add additional information. Em dashes can be used in place of commas to add additional drama to the sentence. Em dashes can also be used to set off contrasting remarks.

- **Examples:**
  
  The bank robbers—with guns in hand—fired the first shot.
  
  We plan to revise the book in two—not three—months.

An en dash (–) is longer than a hyphen and shorter than an em dash. Its length is about the width of a capital N. Use an en dash to show continuation in time, dates, or other numbers. Think of using an en dash instead of the words *to* or *through*.

- **Examples:**
  
  9:00 AM–5:00 PM
  
  1990–94
  
  March–May
  
  pages 220–284

**Parentheses**

Like dashes or commas, parentheses ( ) are used to set off information that is extra or inessential to the meaning of the sentence.

- **Example:**
  
  The chapter on medieval art (pages 172–184) is very interesting.
Quotation Marks

Quotation Marks (""") are used to set off someone’s exact words. A comma always separates what is said from who said it. Periods and commas go inside of quotation marks.

Examples:
“There are too many rules to punctuation,” he stated.
The clerk told me, “There are no more bananas today.”

Use single quotes (’’) to enclose titles of poems, stories, movie titles, or other quoted material within quoted material.

Examples:
“‘Survivor’ is my favorite TV show,” the teenage girl proclaimed.
“If you call Johnny ‘stinky toes’ one more time,” Mom told Suzy, “you’re going to your room.”