

GRAMMAR
— FOR —
WRITERS


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Lecture Notes

Module 1, Lesson 1: Introduction

For many writers, the key to better writing isn't new skills so much as clearing away the clutter of bad habits to get back to fundamental skills that have been there all along.

Human language gives you countless ways to insert more and more information into a sentence—nominative absolute, noun clauses, adjective clauses, participial phrases. Subordinating conjunctions convey all kinds of logical relationships between ideas.

If you're older than about seven years old, you can already use all of these grammatical constructions. You are probably quite good at cramming lots of information into a sentence.

However, at its heart, good, vivid language—whether written or spoken—isn't just about conveying information. It isn't about weeding out the grammar and style errors from your prose. It's about **rendering experience**. That is something that you understood when you were a toddler, even if you have since forgotten it.

When you learn to talk, you start with concrete nouns—things you can see and hear and touch: *Mama, Daddy, kitty, milk, car.*

Pretty soon you add verbs: *Kitty says meow. Milk spilled. Daddy is funny. Car goes fast.*

As you grow, you learn to use increasingly complicated grammatical structures. Through most of your education, your parents and teachers encourage you to express more and more complex ideas with more and more complex grammatical structures. You get rewarded for showing that you can think in abstract terms.

You DO need to be able to think abstractly, and you need to master the grammatical complexities that allow you to communicate abstract ideas. Abstract thinking is an important part of the educational process.

In this course, however, I am going to work from the assumption that you are already fully capable of abstract thought—that you have nothing to prove in that regard. Good, vivid writing tends to move **toward the concrete**, pulling big ideas and concepts down from the realm of the abstract and into the world where we live and move and have our being.

So in this first module of *Grammar for Writers*, we're going to go all the way back to the simplest, most straightforward ways of rendering experience: **Subjects. Verbs. Objects. Complements.**

WHO DID WHAT? Or, WHO DID WHAT TO WHOM? Writing that connects with a reader has to be solid at that level. That's the way information comes to us in the real world. We see who did what to whom. Writing that is strong at the very simple level of subject, verb, object, and complement feels true to your reader.

So here in this first module, we're stripping away all the modifiers, all the subordinate clauses, everything but the main action that a sentence depicts: who did what? We're going to build back all those other constructions in the subsequent modules, but for now, we're going all the way back to some of the first things you learned to do with language when you were a toddler.

There are thirteen lessons remaining in this first module. Here is what you can expect to get from those lessons:

- Tools for identifying the verb and the subject of a clause.
- Tools for finding direct objects and indirect objects.
- Tools for identifying predicate complements and seeing the difference between action verbs and linking verbs.
- The five possible patterns for the structure of a clause.
- Passive voice—how to identify it, why to avoid it, and when it's good to use it.
- Nominalization—the practice of turning verbs into abstract nouns (and why it is a dangerous practice).
- Strong verbs—and why that advice “USE STRONG VERBS” can be misleading.

We will devote a lot of attention to aligning the action of a sentence with the grammar of the sentence by making sure that **actions get expressed as verbs, and the actors are the subjects of those verbs**. That, really, is the central idea of this whole module. Everything else in this module is just a specific and/or technical outworking of that idea of turning actors and actions into subjects and verbs. Once you grasp and apply that idea, your writing will be transformed immediately.

Lecture Notes

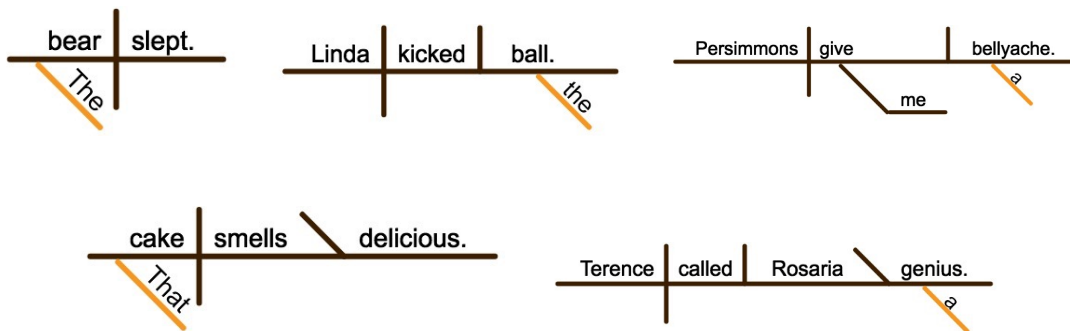
Module 1, Lesson 2: Understanding the Main Line

Every sentence has a main clause. It may have a lot of other things too, but it always has a main clause. The main clause answers the question, WHO DID WHAT?

Each of these sentences consists of one main clause.

- The bear slept.
- Linda kicked a ball.
- Persimmons give me a bellyache.
- That cake smells delicious.
- Terence called Rosaria a genius.

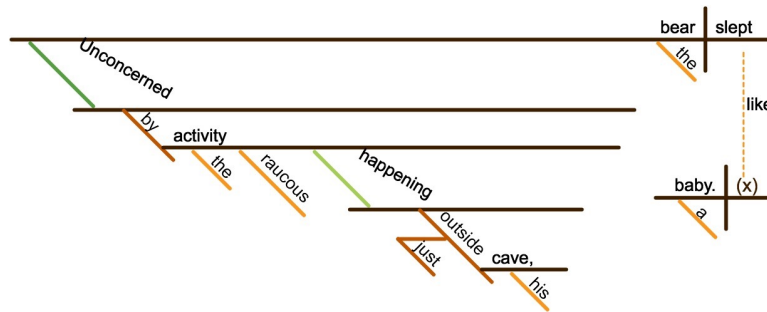
In sentence diagramming, the main clause is represented on the main line. In each of these diagrams, there is only a main line, with nothing (except one article per sentence) branching from the line.



The five patterns represented in these five diagrams are the only possible clause patterns in the English language. We will look much more closely at these patterns in Lesson 5 of this module.

Many (if not most) sentences you write will be considerably more complicated than the sample sentences above. The diagrams for those sentences will have lines sprouting off the main line and branching in different directions, as in this sentence:

Unconcerned by the raucous activity just outside his cave, the bear slept like a baby.



Everything that branches off the main line is a modifier. Modifiers include (but are not limited to) adjectives, adverbs, prepositional phrases, participles, infinitives, and adverbial and adjectival clauses.

Adverbial modifiers answer questions about the action:

- How?
- When?
- Where?
- Why?

Adjectival modifiers answer questions about nouns:

- What kind?
- Which one?
- How many?

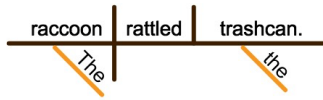
This module of the course is all about the main line—the main clause, that main question: WHO DID WHAT? Most of the rest of the course is about everything that branches off the main line.

Skills to work on in this lesson are identifying that main line and SEPARATING it from all the modifiers.

Consider this sentence:

The raccoon rattled the trashcan.

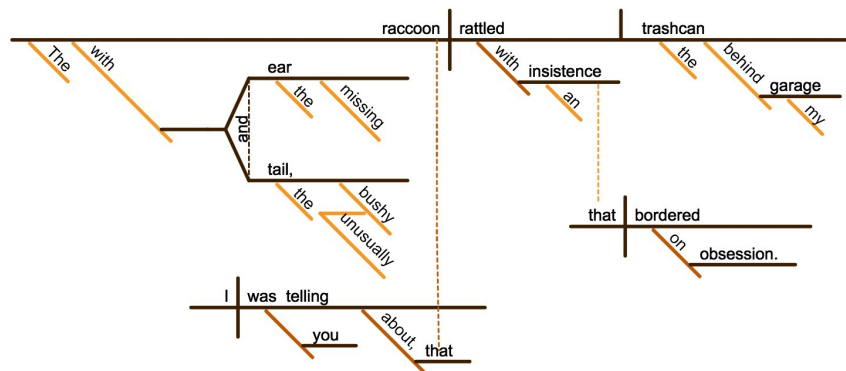
This is a straightforward clause with a subject (raccoon), a verb (rattled), and a direct object (trashcan). Who did what to whom? The raccoon rattled the trashcan. Here's the diagram:



Now, consider this sentence:

The raccoon that I was telling you about, with the missing ear and the unusually bushy tail, rattled the trashcan behind my garage with an insistence that bordered on obsession.

If we were to diagram this sentence, it would look like this:



Compared to the first raccoon sentence, this one is impressively complicated. But perhaps the most impressive thing about these two diagrams is the realization that the main line is exactly the same.

Who did what? *The racoon rattled the trashcan.* This is true for the first, simple raccoon sentence, and it is true for the second, complicated raccoon sentence. The main line is five words (if you count the two the's). In the second sentence, the other 25 words sprouting off the main line are all modifiers. They tell us which raccoon. They tell which trashcan. Notice also that some parts of the modifiers have their own modifiers.

Once you get off the main line, language allows for infinite complexity. But on the main line, the options are NOT infinite. In fact, there are only five patterns, and they are easy to memorize, and with a little practice, you can get good at recognizing them.



Quiz 1.2: Understanding the Main Line

I. I once worked at a plumbing company.

What is the main line of this sentence? In other words, who did what, without any modifiers?

II. I have great admiration for plumbers.

What is the main line of this sentence? In other words, who did what, without any modifiers?

III. Plumbers confront problems that most of us run away from.

What is the main line of this sentence? In other words, who did what, without any modifiers?

IV. I cannot imagine a civil society without indoor plumbing.

What is the main line of this sentence? In other words, who did what, without any modifiers?

V. Nevertheless, my plumber friends were not always so civil.

What is the main line of this sentence? In other words, who did what, without any modifiers?

VI. Plumbers conduct an ongoing, often bitter feud with roofers.

What is the main line of this sentence? In other words, who did what, without any modifiers?

VII. If you see a plumber, you should hug his or her neck.

What is the main line of the main clause in this sentence? In other words, who did what, without any modifiers?



Lecture Notes

Module 1, Lesson 3: Subjects and Verbs

A clause is a unit of grammar that describes a bit of action. **A clause ALWAYS includes a subject and a verb.** It may also include other things, like a direct object, an indirect object, a predicate nominative, a predicate adjective, or an objective complement. This is true of every clause, whether it's a main clause (independent clause) or a subordinate clause (dependent clause).

When you analyze the grammar of a sentence, start by finding the verb (or verbs). **Verbs express action or a state of being.**

The Verb Finder provides a rule of thumb that will help you find the verb(s) in any clause. The verb of any clause will fit into one or more of these blanks and form a grammatically correct sentence:

I _____.
YOU _____.
HE/SHE/IT _____.

In the sentence, *Linda kicked the ball*, only one word fits in the Verb Finder:

I Linda.
I kicked.
I the.
I ball.

I kicked is a sentence. The other three combinations are nonsensical.

Note that if I _____ doesn't yield a verb, YOU _____ or HE/SHE/IT _____ should, as in this example:

The cake smells delicious.

I <u>the</u> .	YOU <u>the</u> .	HE/SHE/IT <u>the</u> .
I <u>cake</u> .	YOU <u>cake</u> .	HE/SHE/IT <u>cake</u> .
I <u>smells</u> .	YOU <u>smells</u> .	HE/SHE/IT <u>smells</u>.
I <u>delicious</u> .	YOU <u>delicious</u> .	HE/SHE/IT <u>delicious</u> .

The Verb Finder works for all tenses, including the more complex tenses, like past-, present-, and future-progressive and past-, present-, and future-perfect.

The Verb Finder, however, is not fool-proof if you don't apply some common sense. Every verb will fit in the blank of the Verb Finder, but sometimes non-verbs will also fit in the blank. Consider our sentence from the last lesson:

The racoon rattled the trash can.

When you apply the Verb Finder, you quickly see that *rattled* is a verb:

I rattled.
YOU rattled.
HE/SHE/IT rattled.

But the word *can* also fits in the verb finder:

I can.
YOU can.
HE/SHE/IT can.

It only takes a little common sense to see that, although *can sometimes* serves as a verb, it is not serving as a verb in this sentence.

Here's a somewhat harder example:

Rattled by my experience with the alligator, I gave up waterskiing.

Rattled looks very much like a verb (indeed, it *was* our verb in the previous example), and it fits in the Verb Finder, but here it's actually a participle, a verb that has been turned into a modifier. The actual verb here is *gave up*, which, of course, also fits in the Verb Finder.

A Word About the *To Be* Verb

The most common verb in any language is the *to be* verb. It's a good idea to memorize the forms of *to be*:

AM	WAS	BE
ARE	WERE	BEING
IS		BEEN

Any time you see one of these words, you have found the verb. It may be the whole verb, as in

Fernando is a deep sea diver.

Or a *to be* verb may be a helping verb, as in

Fernando was swimming with the sharks (part of the past present form *was swimming*).

Or,

Fernando was stung by jellyfish (part of the passive verb *was stung*).

Identifying Subjects

Once you have used the Verb Finder to identify the verbs, you can use the Subject Finder to identify the subject. The Subject Finder is a simple question. Having used the Verb Finder to identify the verb, drop the verb into the blank of this question:

WHO OR WHAT _____?

The answer to that question is your subject. Consider the following sentence:

Linda kicked the ball.

The verb is *kicked*, so the Subject Finder is the question "Who kicked?" **Linda** kicked. *Linda* is the subject.

That cake smells delicious.
What smells? **Cake** smells.

You are a sweetheart.
Who are? **You** are.

One of the bonus features of the Subject Finder is that it can help you discover if you have mistakenly identified a verb. If, in the sentence *The raccoon rattled the trash can* you were to mistakenly say that *can* is a verb, you will see your problem once you apply the Subject Finder. Who can? Well, nobody can. That's not what the sentence is about.

To review:

- Every clause has BOTH a subject and a verb.
- You can identify the verb using the Verb Finder:
I _____.
You _____.
He/She/It _____.
- The verb of a clause will *always* fit in that blank.
- Unfortunately, some other words may fit in the blank too, so you have to be careful.
- Once you've found your verb, you can plug that verb into the Subject Finder to identify the subject:
Who or what _____.
- A clause *always* has a verb and subject, and it may have an object or a complement. Identifying these elements will be the subject of our next lesson.



Quiz 1.3: Subjects and Verbs

I. The angry mob chased the pirate.

What is the VERB in this sentence?

- A. angry
- B. mob
- C. chased
- D. pirate

II. Many years' rough wisdom shone from his one good eye.

What is the VERB in this sentence?

- A. years'
- B. rough
- C. wisdom
- D. shone
- E. good
- F. eye

III. Many years' rough wisdom shone from his one good eye.

What is the SUBJECT in this sentence?

- A. many
- B. years'
- C. rough
- D. wisdom
- E. shone
- F. good
- G. eye

IV. John Barber, frightened by the possum in his driveway, cried like a small child.

What is the VERB in this sentence?

- A. frightened
- B. possum
- C. cried

V. The pirate was chased by the angry mob.

What is the VERB in this sentence?

- A. pirate
- B. was
- C. chased
- D. was chased
- E. angry
- F. mob

VI. The pirate was chased by the angry mob.

What is the SUBJECT in this sentence?

- A. pirate
- B. angry
- C. mob

VII. Chasing cars is my dog's favorite activity.

What is the VERB in this sentence?

- A. chasing
- B. cars
- C. is
- D. dog's
- E. favorite
- F. activity

VIII. Chasing cars is my dog's favorite activity.

What is the SUBJECT in this sentence?

- A. chasing
- B. cars
- C. is
- D. dog's
- E. favorite
- F. activity

IX. I arrange my mashed potatoes just so, and you destroy it all with your spoon.

A compound sentence will have at least two main subjects and two main verbs. What are the two main subject/verb combinations in the sentence above?

- A. I mashed, you destroy
- B. I arrange, you destroy
- C. I arrange, destroy it all
- D. mashed potatoes, with your spoon



Lecture Notes

Module 1, Lesson 4: Objects and Complements

Grammar is about relatively simple units organized in infinitely complex ways. A clause is one of those relatively simple units. (I am speaking here of the main line of a clause, not its modifiers.)

A clause tells who did what. It has a subject and a verb. And it may have TWO (and only two) other things: OBJECTS and COMPLEMENTS.

An OBJECT is a NOUN—a person, place or thing that RECEIVES the action of a verb. **The subject PERFORMS the action, the object RECEIVES the action** (at least in an active construction; passive constructions, as we will see, are a different matter).

Linda kicked the ball.

Linda is the subject—she did the kicking. The ball is the object. It got kicked. It RECEIVED the kick.

Finding Direct Objects

Just as we had a Verb Finder and a Subject Finder, there is also a Direct Object Finder. Once you have found your verb and your subject, you plug them into this question:

SUBJECT VERB who or what?

If that question has an answer, the answer is your direct object. In the case of LINDA KICKED THE BALL, the Direct Object Finder is the question,

*Linda kicked what? **The ball.***

Ball is the direct object.

In the case of *A goat ate my cell phone*, the Direct Object Finder is the question,

Goat ate what? My cell phone.

Cell phone is the direct object.

Finding Indirect Objects

IF you have a direct object, you may ALSO have an **indirect object**—another noun that doesn't directly receive the action, but FOR WHOM or TO WHOM the action is performed. This indirect object always appears immediately before the direct object.

So let's look at this sentence: *I will pour you a glass of water.*

First, use the Direct Object Finder: *I will pour what?* Be careful here: don't say YOU. I'm not pouring YOU. I will pour a **glass of water**.

Now that we've found the Direct Object, we can apply the Indirect Object Finder.

The Indirect Object Finder, like the Subject Finder and the Direct Object Finder, is a fill-in-the-blank question:

SUBJECT VERB DIRECT OBJECT to or for whom?

*I will pour a glass of water to or for whom? **You.***

You is the indirect object.

Grandpa read Cindy a book.

*Grandpa read a book to or for whom? **Cindy.***

Cindy is the indirect object.

Direct and Indirect Object Review

- An object is always a noun or a noun equivalent.
- You can't have an indirect object without a direct object.
- The indirect object, if you have one, always comes immediately before the direct object.
- An indirect can always be rephrased as a prepositional phrase beginning with *to* or *for*.

Ken gave Barbie flowers = Ken gave flowers to Barbie.

Grandpa read Cindy a book = Grandpa read a book to Cindy.

Predicate Complements

A complement either renames the subject, or describes the subject. The following sentences contain predicate complements:

- *My heroes have always been cowboys.* (*Heroes* renames *cowboys*.)
- *You are a sweetheart.* (*Sweetheart* renames *you*.)
- *My dog is lazy.* (*Lazy* describes *my dog*.)
- *My dog smells funny.* (*Funny* describes *my dog*.)

A **predicate nominative** is a **noun** that **renames** the subject.

A **predicate adjective** is an **adjective** that **describes** the subject.

The verb that connects or links the subject and the complement is called a **linking verb**.

Think of a linking verb as an 'equal sign':

- My heroes = cowboys
- You = sweetheart
- My dog = lazy
- My dog = funny (as regards her odor)

The most common linking verb (by far) is *to be*: AM, IS, ARE, WAS, WERE, BE, BEING, BEEN

There are other linking verbs:

- *You LOOK lovely.*
- *Luther SMELLS strange.*
- *That test PROVED difficult.*

There is no reason to try to memorize all the linking verbs. If the noun after a verb renames the subject, or if an adjective after a verb describes the subject, that verb is serving as a linking verb.

Distinguishing Objects from Complements

What's the difference between an OBJECT and a COMPLEMENT? An object is a noun that is separate from the subject. The subject does something to or for the object.

A complement IS the subject (or, rather, it IS the subject if it's a noun, it DESCRIBES the subject if it's an adjective).

Consider these two sentences:

- *My dog smells funny.*
- *My dog smells a hamburger.*

These sentences look a lot alike, but one of them has a direct object, and one of them has a complement. To put it another way, in one of these sentences, SMELLS is an action verb, and in one of these sentences, *smells* is a linking verb.

In the first sentence, *funny* is a complement. It describes the dog. So *smells* is operating as a linking verb. In the second sentence, *hamburger* is a DIRECT OBJECT. The dog is not a hamburger. In this case, *smells* is an action verb; it tells something that the dog is doing TO the hamburger.

To review:

- On the main line of a clause, you MUST have a subject and a verb, and you MAY have an object (possibly two—direct and indirect) or a complement.
- There are two kinds of objects. The direct object receives the action. The indirect object is the entity to whom or for whom the action is performed.
- There are two types of complements: predicate nominatives (nouns that rename a subject) and predicate adjectives (adjectives that describe a subject).
- A complement renames or describes the subject, but an object is a noun that is separate from the subject.
- A less common type of complement, the objective complement, renames or describes a direct object, just as a predicate complement renames or describes the subject. We will see examples of objective complements in the next lesson.

Incredibly, we have now looked at everything that can happen on the main line of a clause: subjects, verbs, objects, complements. These elements can only occur in certain combinations and in certain orders. There are only five such combinations—the five clause patterns of the next lesson.



Quiz 1.4 A: Identifying Subjects, Verbs, Objects, and Complements

I. The most fascinating year of Vincent's career was the last year of his life.
Identify the subject, verb, and predicate complement for this sentence.

II. An important step toward recovery of healthy self-esteem is deeper self-awareness.

This question has two parts:

- a) What is the grammatical subject?
- b) Is self-awareness a direct object or a predicate complement?

III. I wondered if they were talking about me.

Does this sentence have a direct object? If so, what is it? (Hint: You're probably going to need to use the Direct Object Finder for this one.)

IV. In front of her was an old man who turned out to be George Jones.

What are the subject and verb of this sentence? (You're going to need to use your Subject Finder on this one.)



Quiz 1.4 B: Objects and Complements (Challenge)

I. Mike leaned forward on the rail that separated the porch from the descending hillside.

What is the "main line" of this sentence? In other words, what is the main action, without any modifiers? Who did what?

II. He makes his slow, gloating trot around the misshapen diamond squeezed into the backyard.

What is the "main line" of this sentence? In other words, what is the main action, without any modifiers? Who did what?

III. My family moved to Phoenix from Chicago when I was seven.

What is the "main line" of this sentence? In other words, what is the main action, without any modifiers? Who did what?

IV. The truck has been sitting in my driveway for months.

What is the "main line" of this sentence? In other words, what is the main action, without any modifiers? Who did what?

V. Going west, my family traded tornados for tumbleweeds and the occasional aftershock of an earthquake.

What is the "main line" of this sentence? In other words, what is the main action, without any modifiers? Who did what?

VI. They had not touched the bird feeder I hung two weeks ago.

What is the "main line" of this sentence? In other words, what is the main action, without any modifiers? Who did what?

VII. As the mists of my dullness gradually cleared, the truth broke with a light that pierces to this day.

What is the "main line" of this sentence? In other words, what is the main action, without any modifiers? Who did what?

VIII. The worst water was in the middle of the channel, but that was also the safest place.

This sentence is a compound sentence. It has two independent (main) clauses. Identify the subject and verb for each of the two independent clauses.

IX. It was our third day out, and we had camped nearby, several miles from where our trip began.

This sentence is a compound sentence. It has two independent (main) clauses. Identify the subject and verb for each of the two independent clauses.

X. Five of them bound together at their base where the stem holds them together, overlapping. An upside-down cup. Like the back of my grandmother's hands, the delicate veins are visible. One thick purple line extending from base to tip with dozens of thinner ones stretching out from center to edges.

In that group of four "sentences," only one is actually a sentence, with a subject and a verb. Which one is it?

XI. The two of us standing in her tiny kitchen with the avocado and pumpkin hued accents and stained Tupperware cups that made me squeamish every time I had to drink from one.

What is the main line (subject, verb, and object(s) or complement) of this sentence?