Subjects and Verb Tenses

I. PARTS OF A SENTENCE: Subjects and Verbs
Every complete sentence must contain a subject and a verb showing tense.

A. Subject: the person, place, thing, or idea doing an action or being described.

Usually, a subject is said before its verb:

The trees blew in the wind.

However, sometimes it can be a little difficult to locate a subject:

On a hill under an old, gnarled tree howled a wolf.

If you aren't sure what the subject is, try to find the action (verb). The verb is howled. Now, ask yourself, "What howled?" The answer is a wolf howled. Therefore, in this sentence, a wolf is the subject, and howled is the verb.

B. Verbs

1. Action Verb—The physical action done by the subject.

The cat meowed at her kittens.

In this sentence, the cat is the thing that did an action, meow. Therefore, the cat is the subject, and meowed is the verb.

2. Linking (State of Being) Verbs—Verbs that connect to description of the subject.

Most common linking verbs are the forms of “be” (am, is, are, was, were, . . .)

Verbs like appear and seem are also in this category.

I am ready to eat. You seem angry with me.

Both ready and angry are adjectives used to describe the subjects “I” and “you.” The verbs am and seem link the subjects with their adjectives.

II. The VERB of a sentence MUST HAVE TENSE
There are three, one-word tenses, called simple tenses: past, present, and future

A. Past Tense—The action is already completed or finished.

Form of regular verbs: verb + ed
Irregular verbs have alternate forms to show past tense: for example, write/wrote, sleep/slept, get/got, fly/flew, spend/spent. It might seem unfair, but irregular verb forms just need to be memorized or learned through use over time.

If was/were (a past tense state-of-being verb) is used to describe the subject, it is implied that this state of being is not true anymore.

My roommate was sad yesterday. (implied: my roommate is not sad anymore)

B. Present Tense—When an action happens habitually, or a statement is generally true with no time limit.

Note: With third-person singular subjects, verbs in simple present tense have an -s ending.

I like sushi. She likes sushi. We eat sushi every week.

C. Future Tense—The action has yet to happen or state of being is yet to be, but it is confidently expected.

Form: will + base form of verb

I forgot to buy milk today, so I will run to the store tomorrow.

III. VERBS CAN ALSO SHOW “ASPECT”: an emphasis on the completed-ness or ongoing-ness of the action. It is formed with the aid of the helping verbs “have” or “be” that are changed for tense, plus a present or past participle (see the following tense/aspect table). These forms can be called “tenses” because they express these aspects in relation to a point in time.

A. Perfect—Emphasizes the “completed-ness” of an action or state in relation to another action or time.

1. Past perfect is for a past action completed farther back in time compared to another past action.

Form: had + past participle

Until I finally wrote (simple past irr. vb.) to my mom, she had called (past perfect reg. verb) me almost daily. She had been (past perfect irr. vb.) worried° about me.
°(worried might look like a verb, but here it is working as an adjective)

2. Present perfect is an action completed in relation to the present.

Form: have verb+ed (irregular verbs may use a form different from verb+ed)
The regular verb+ed or irregular verb (irr.) here is called a “past participle.”

I finally wrote (simple past tense, irr. verb) to my mom yesterday, but I have written (present perfect irr. verb) to my girlfriend almost daily since I left home. It’s okay because Mom has called (present perfect reg. verb) me every day since I left!
3. Future perfect is for a future action that is expected to be completed by a future point.

   Form: will have + past participle

   When I graduate, I will have written my mother 260 weekly letters.

B. Progressive—Emphasizes the “ongoing-ness” of the action.

   Form: Be+tense + verbing The verbing word here is called a “present participle.”

   We were chatting (past progressive) about music earlier, but now we are studying (present progressive) for our test and soon we will be graduating! (future progressive)

C. Perfect Progressive—Emphasizes ongoing action in relation to another action/time

   Form: had been + verbing (past perfect progressive), has/have been + verbing (present perfect progressive), and will have been + verbing (future perfect progressive)

   He had been acting (past perfect progressive) like a slacker all last year, but he has been improving (present perfect progressive) his performance since he got his part-time job, and by the end of this year, he will have been performing (future perfect progressive) well enough in school to get on the Dean’s List!

IV. VERBS CAN BE IN PASSIVE VOICE to show the subject receives the action, or to shift attention/emphasis to the object of the action. (See the following table.)

   Form: be+tense + past participle

   The studies were conducted by the institute. (plural past tense passive voice)
   The essay has been written skillfully. (singular present perfect passive voice)
   I will be given the phone back once they fix it. (future perfect passive voice)
# How to Form Tensed Verbs for Aspect and Passive Voice

*for irregular verbs, the past participle may be different from the simple past tense form

** With third-person singular subjects, most simple present tense verbs need –s ending. (verb+s)

## Tense

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How to form the verb</th>
<th>Past</th>
<th>Present</th>
<th>Future</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Simple</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action verb:</td>
<td>verb+ed, or irr. form*</td>
<td>verb/verb+s **</td>
<td>“will” + verb will be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linking verb:</td>
<td>Was/were</td>
<td>is, am, are</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Progressive</strong></td>
<td>“tensed” be + present participle verb (verb+ing)</td>
<td>was/were walking</td>
<td>am/is/are walking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(emphasizes continuousness)</td>
<td>was/were being</td>
<td>am/is/are being</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perfect Progressive</strong></td>
<td>“tensed” have + been + present participle verb (verb+ing)</td>
<td>had been walking</td>
<td>has/have been walking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(emphasizes duration)</td>
<td>had helped had given had been</td>
<td>has/have helped has/have given has/have been</td>
<td>will have helped will have given will have been</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perfect</strong></td>
<td>“tensed” have + past participle verb (verb+ed,*)</td>
<td>had helped had given had been</td>
<td>has/have helped has/have given has/have been</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(emphasizes completed-ness)</td>
<td>has/have helped has/have given has/have been</td>
<td>will have helped will have given will have been</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Voice</strong></td>
<td>“tensed” be + past participle verb (verb+ed,*)</td>
<td>was helped was given*</td>
<td>is/am/are helped is/am/are given*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verb ACTS ON the subject, or emphasis on the OBJECT</td>
<td>was given*</td>
<td>will be helped will be given*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from *The Grammar Book*, by Celce-Murcia & Larson-Freeman
V. Modal Verbs

*Could, can, should, would, may, might, shall,* and *will* are another kind of helping verb called *modals.* They show degrees of possibility, obligation, or certainty for the base verb that follows it.

Form: *modal + base verb*

- I *could take* a nap. (possibility)
- You *should see* me now. (obligation or recommendation)
- I *might travel* to Europe next summer. (degree of certainty)

With modals, both modal and base verb *together* function as one verb for its subject.

**CONFUSING VERB FORMS**

*(When words look like verbs but have different functions in a sentence)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Looks Like</th>
<th>Its function in a sentence (IMPORTANT)</th>
<th>What you call it (less important)</th>
<th>Comments/Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verb+ing</td>
<td>Noun</td>
<td>Gerund</td>
<td>Example: <em>Running</em> is a sport.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb+ing</td>
<td>Adjective</td>
<td>Present Participial Adjective</td>
<td><em>Running</em> water has finally become available in the village.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb+ing</td>
<td>Verb (ONLY when combined with tensed helping verbs)</td>
<td>Present Participle</td>
<td>Used for <em>progressive aspect.</em> See Aspect/Voice table.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To + verb</td>
<td>NOT A VERB! Noun/Adjective/Adverb</td>
<td>Infinitive</td>
<td>“to + verb” has no tense, so cannot function as a verb in a sentence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb+ed</td>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>Simple Past Tense Verb</td>
<td>To show simple past tense: <em>NO helping verbs</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb+ed</td>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>Past Participle</td>
<td>To show <em>perfect aspect OR passive voice:</em> MUST be combined with a tensed helping verb! See: Aspect/Voice table.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb+ed</td>
<td>Adjective</td>
<td>Past Participial Adjective</td>
<td>The <em>washed</em> car gleamed in the sun. I scrubbed <em>burnt</em> food off the pan.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>