

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*, and *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^o about me.

^o(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

Adapted from *The Grammar Book*, by Celce-Murcia & Larson-Freeman

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

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 or ability)

You **should save** money for the future. (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)

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