

Phrases

Consider a sentence like the one below:

(The)_____seem(s) all right.

You can fill in the blank with words like *John*, *diligence*, or *dog*, so these words are nouns. You'll notice that each of these nouns seems to occupy more or less the same function in the sentence: it's "the thing that seems". Of course, you're not going to get a sentence like *Dog seems all right*. You need *The dog* or *The old dog*, or *the old dog on the doorstep*, or even *the old dog that I saw yesterday*. What this shows is that groups of words can have the same function in a sentence as a single word. A word or a group of words that has a particular function in a sentence is called a **phrase**. Sentences are divided into multiple phrases, and the difficulty for most people is in identifying where each phrase begins and ends. The sentence *The dog seems all right* has three phrases: *the dog*, *seems*, and *all right*. You can also have phrases within phrases, as in *The old dog that I saw yesterday seems all right*, where the first phrase, *the old dog that I saw yesterday* can be further divided into *I*, *saw*, *that*, and *yesterday*.

Phrase Types

In order to identify phrases successfully, you need to understand two principles: the **headword** and the **subject-predicate** division. Phrases are divided into headwords and modifiers. For instance, consider the phrases *the dog*, and *the old dog*. Each of these function like the single noun *dog*, so *dog* is the headword. The words *the* and *old* modify *dog*; therefore they are modifiers. **A phrase consists of a headword and all of its modifiers**. Thus, in the sentence *The old dog seems all right*, the first phrase is *the old dog*. (You may think that *all right* is a modifier of *dog*, but it is not for reasons we will come to when we discuss subjects and predicates.) Be careful. Sometimes modifiers can move around and be separated from their headwords, especially adverbs, as in the following sentences:

Suddenly, he left.
He suddenly left.
He left suddenly.

In the sentences above, *suddenly* is an adverb modifying *left*.

Before we discuss subjects and predicates, it is important to look at the different types of phrases that can occur in a sentence.

A **noun phrase (NP)** is a noun or any group of words that can substitute for a noun.

A **verb phrase (VP)** is a verb or any group of words that can substitute for a verb. A particularly important type of verb phrase is the **main verb phrase (MVP)**, which is the main verb of the sentence plus accompanying **auxiliary** or **helping verb(s)**.

An **adjective phrase (AdjP)** is an adjective or any group of words that can substitute for an adjective.

An **adverb phrase (AdvP)** is an adverb or any group of words that can substitute for an adverb.

There is also a type of phrase called a **prepositional phrase (PP)**, which consists of a preposition followed by a noun phrase, as in *to the dog*. Prepositional phrases can function as adjective phrases or adverb phrases, as in the following sentences:

The cat in the hat (AdjP: *in the hat* modifies *cat*)
He looks up the road (AdvP: *up the road* modifies *looks*)

Subjects and Predicates

A **subject** is a noun phrase that performs the action of the verb or precedes the verb *be*:

John seems all right.
John is all right.

It is often thought of as the topic of the sentence and generally (but not always) comes at or near the beginning of the sentence before the predicate.

A **predicate** is a verb phrase followed by a **complement**, a noun phrase, adjective phrase, or adverb phrase that completes the meaning of the verb. The predicate generally (but not always) comes after the subject.

Together, a subject and predicate make up a **clause**. To have a complete sentence, you must have at least one full clause.

One problem people often have in identifying the subjects of sentences is that they forget that whole clauses can themselves function as modifiers of the headword of the subject phrase. Consider the sentence below:

The old dog that I saw yesterday seems all right.

The subject of the sentence is *The old dog that I saw yesterday*, but it contains within it a whole clause—*that I saw yesterday*—with its own subject: *I*. The clause *The old dog seems all right* is considered the **independent clause** because it can form a sentence on its own. The clause *that I saw yesterday* is considered a **dependent clause** because it cannot form a sentence on its own. Dependent clauses are generally introduced by certain types of words such as **relative pronouns** or **relative adverbs** (words like *which*, *who*, *that*, and *where*, which introduce dependent clauses called **relative clauses**) and **subordinate conjunctions** and **conjunctive adverbs** (words like *after*, *although*, *if*, *however*, *afterwards*, and *indeed*, which introduce dependent clauses called **subordinate clauses**).

The Main Verb Phrase

The **main verb phrase** consists of a verb and any auxiliaries attached to it, at least one of which must be in the present or past tense. (The underlined phrase in *Having lost his hat, he bought a new one* is a verb phrase, but it is not the main verb phrase, which *bought*).

In order to understand the use of auxiliaries, it is necessary to review the five **principle parts** of the verb: infinitive, present tense, past tense, present participle, and past participle.

- The **infinitive** (sometimes called the *base* form) has no inflection. It is often preceded by the word *to*, as in *to go*.
- The **present tense** is formed using allomorphs of {-s present tense}.
- The **past tense** is formed using allomorphs of {-d past tense}.
- The **present participle** is formed using {-ing present participle}
- The **past participle** is formed using {-ed past participle}

Important observations: Certain forms look alike and are often confused. The present tense some singular and all plural verbs has a zero-allomorph of {-s present tense} and so looks the same as the infinitive (*to go* vs. *I go*). Many verbs also have past tense and past participle forms that look alike (*I talked* vs. *I have talked*). Also, it is important to remember that the past participle is *talked*, not *have talked*, which is two separate words. In the preceding verb phrase *have* is in the present tense, and *talked* is in the past participle form.

Auxiliaries, or **auxiliary verbs**, are often called **helping verbs** because they appear to “help” the main verb in some way. Specifically, they combine with the main verb to provide some rather sophisticated information.

The Other Half of the Predicate

As stated above, a predicate consists of a main verb phrase plus a complement. A complement is a noun phrase, adjective phrase, or adverb phrase that completes the meaning of the verb. Some predicates do not have a complement, as in *I go*. In these cases, the predicate consists only of a main verb phrase. Here are some examples of sentences with complements:

I am *a student* (noun phrase)

I see *a student* (noun phrase)

I am *unhappy* (adjective phrase)

I am *at home* (adverb phrase)