

Five Basic Sentence Types

The predicates of sentences can be structured into five different ways. Some books assign them type numbers (like Types 1-5), but these are not used universally. **You need to memorise the names, not type numbers.**

Depending on the type of predicate you have, the verb is labelled intransitive, linking, or transitive.

Predicates with Intransitive Verbs

Intransitive verbs can stand alone as the whole predicate, although they may also have adverbial modifiers. Examples are the verbs in *I slept*, *I slept well*, and *I slept like a baby*. (NB that a prepositional phrase can function adverbially.)

You can perform the following tests to determine if a verb is intransitive:

1. Divide the predicate into phrases and see if it contains only a VP or a VP + an adverbial phrase.
2. If you are not sure if the phrase modifying the VP is adverbial, try replacing it with a prototypical adverb like *there* or *then*. If this works, the phrase is functioning adverbially.

You'll notice if you diagram these sentences that intransitive verbs do not have complements. The adverbial phrase just modifies the verb. All the other types of verbs have complements.

Predicates with Linking or Copular/Copulative Verbs

A **linking verb** is a verb that is completed by a phrase which describes the subject of the sentence. This phrase is a complement.

Linking verbs occur with two different types of complements: **adverbial complements** and **subject complements**. An adverbial complement is an adverbial phrase. A subject complement is an adjectival phrase or a noun phrase that describes the subject. The following examples illustrate this"

1. An adverbial complement: *I am outside*, *I am in the garage*.
2. An adjectival subject complement: *I am happy*, *I feel sick*, *He seems all right*.
3. A noun subject complement: *I am a genius*, *She considers him a coward*.

We'll examine each more closely in turn.

***Be* Followed by an Adverbial Phrase**

Examples are *Jesse is outside*. *Her job interviews were yesterday*. *Cheryl's notebook must have been on the desk*. *The reception will be at noon*. You'll notice that they look like intransitive verbs. But compare *The train departs at noon* with *The reception is at noon*. The verbs in the sentences are different because the verb *be* has a special status. It normally functions like an equals sign, between the subject and the complement (e.g. *I am a genius*). Intransitive verbs like *depart* do not function as an equals sign.

Be or Another Linking Verb Followed by an Adjectival Subject Complement

When the subject of a linking verb is described by the verbs complement, the complement is called a **subject complement**. Subject complements can be adjectival or nominal. We'll deal with the **adjectival subject complement** first. Since many grammars use the term **predicate adjective**, that is worth knowing as a synonym. Examples are *Sheila is beautiful*. *His parties were very lavish*. *Bill is becoming friendly*. *Your uncle has seemed happy in the past*.

Most people are taught that verbs are modified by adverbs (e.g. *I sang well*). But consider a sentence like *I feel bad about that*. Notice that *bad* is an adjective, not an adverb. Why isn't it *I feel badly about that*? Or is it? Well, we could analyse these sentences like this.

I sang well (Intransitive, adverbial modifier)

I feel bad about that (Linking, adjectival subject complement)

I feel badly about that (Verb Type?, adverbial complement)

As you can see, there is no type that fits the last sentence. However, people do use constructions like this. Probably many examples of adverbs used with linking verbs are the result of hypercorrections by people who were taught that adverbs modify verbs. As you can see, this is a simplification which doesn't acknowledge the difference between a subject complement and a verb modifier which exists in Standard Educated English. It's even possible in some nonstandard grammars to have the distinction broken down in the other direction. Consider *I sang good*.

Even in Standard English, the distinctions are not blurred with a few words. Consider the following sentences.

I feel bad. (Linking, adjectival subject complement)

I don't feel well. (Linking, adverbial complement?)

In Standard English this only occurs with a small number of words. You need to pay attention to Standard Written Usage to learn them.

You can tell whether you have a linking verb followed by an adjectival complement by checking for the following:

1. The main verb is followed by an adjectival phrase describing the subject.
2. The main verb is *be* or can be replaced by *be* without major change to the meaning of the sentence.
3. The most common linking verbs are *be*, *appear*, *become*, *seem*, *grow*, *prove*, *remain*, *turn*, *feel*, *look*, *smell*, *taste*, and *sound*. But note that they do not always *function* as linking verbs, so don't automatically assume that they are.

Be or Another Linking Verb Followed by a Nominal Subject Complement

A **nominal subject complement** is also called a **predicate nominative** in some grammars. The term *nominal* means something that functions as a noun. The term **nominative** is useful for specifying the case of the complement, as we'll see in a moment. Examples are *Those men are*

brutes. The auction was a success. Our office is becoming a jungle. My three sisters remained friends afterwards.

An interesting usage problem can be seen in the sentence *It was I who volunteered to write the report*. Many people would say *It was me*, but people with prescriptive attitudes, including many publishers, would correct this. The reason is that there was an early prescriptive rule that nominal subject complements, or *predicate nominatives*, should in the nominative or subjective case. For most noun phrases, this doesn't make any difference, but for pronouns it does. This prescriptive rule has mostly disappeared from spoken standard English, but some speakers still insist on it, and many more follow the rule in writing.

Predicates with Transitive Verbs

A **transitive verb** is a verb that is completed by direct object. A **direct object** is defined as a noun phrase which completes a transitive verb. This circularity causes problems for some people. It is perhaps easier to think of what a direct object is and what it is not. A direct object is a noun phrase that does not function as a subject complement; that is, it does not describe the subject. Compare the following sentences:

The house looks a wreck. Linking, Nominal Subject Complement
She prefers popcorn. Transitive, Direct Object

Let's sum up by seeing the patterns:

Main Verb Phrase	Complement
Intransitive	--
Intransitive	Adverbial Modifier
Linking	Adverbial Complement
Linking	Adjectival Subject Complement
Linking	Nominal Subject Complement
Transitive	Noun Phrase (Direct Object)

It's important to realise that no other pattern is possible. You can't have, say an intransitive verb with a direct object, or a transitive verb with a subject complement. So be sure not to make that mistake. Memorise these patterns *very* well. You should also memorise the following sentences to reinforces this table:

1. With an intransitive verb no complement exists.
2. With a linking verb an adverbial, adjectival, or noun phrase is the complement.
3. A transitive verb has a noun phrase as its direct object.

Object Complements

Consider the following sentences:

She prefers popcorn. Transitive, Direct Object
She gives him popcorn. Transitive, Direct Object

Both sentences have transitive verbs, but what is the direct object in the second sentence? *Him* is in fact the **indirect object**, a structure we'll look at a little later. For now, follow this procedure:

1. Make sure that you don't have a nominal subject complement.
2. If you have two noun phrases immediately following a verb, the second is the direct object unless it describes the first.

Well what if the second does describe the first? Here's an example: *She considers him a genius*. Notice that *him* is the direct object and *a genius* describes *him*? This is called an **object complement**.

What if the subject is its own direct object?

He cut him (refers to two entities)
He cut himself (refers to one entity)

Notice that English uses the reflexive pronoun to solve the problem!

What about these sentences:

The ball rolled slowly (Intransitive, Adverbial Modifier)
The child rolled the ball (Transitive, Direct Object)

So is *roll* a transitive or an intransitive verb. This is a pointless debate. It changes depending on whether you have an adverbial modifier or a direct object. Page 225 gives a number of examples of verbs that sometimes function as different types. Let's look at them.

Comma Faults

When speaking we frequently interrupt the subject-main verb-complement pattern. For instance, *Our whole class, with the possible exception of the nerd who sits in the front, surely failed the midterm*. Identify the different constituents of the sentence. Notice that, although we don't have a problem in speech, conventions in writing demand that you put commas around all the material that interrupts this pattern. When I say *around* I mean at both the beginning and the end. If you leave one or both out, you have what is called a **comma fault**. Here are some rules for avoiding comma faults.

1. Never insert a lone comma between a subject and predicate or between the main verb and its complement(s).
2. Use two commas to separate off anything that interrupts the subject and predicate or the verb and its complement(s).

You can now see two explanations for people's failure to use commas correctly.

1. They have been incorrectly taught that commas mark pauses in speech.
2. They are not able to analyse the subject, predicate, main verb phrase, and complement structures, so they can't see where the commas should go.

3. They forget that commas must go on *both* sides of the material that interrupts the subject-predicate or main verb-complement pattern.