

# Identifying Verbs, Subjects, Clauses, Phrases

## Identifying Verbs

A verb is a word that can change its form to indicate the time or tense of a sentence.

Example: Yesterday, the cows were in the pasture.

Today, the cows are in the pasture.

Tomorrow, the cows will be in the pasture.

The verb in this sentence is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

A word ending in *ing* is a verb only when it has a helping verb in front of it (usually a form of *to be*).

Example: Today, the girls are playing baseball.

Yesterday, the girls \_\_\_\_\_.

Tomorrow, the girls \_\_\_\_\_.

The verb in this sentence is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

## Identifying Subjects

A subject is a word or phrase that does the actions indicated by the verb. To find the subject, ask the following question:

Who or what \_\_\_\_\_?  
(verb)

Example: The cow was eating in the pasture.

Ask yourself "who or what was eating?"

The answer is \_\_\_\_\_, which is the subject of the sentence.

## Identifying Clauses

**A clause is a group of words that could stand alone as a sentence. It has a subject/verb unit:**

Example:       The man smoked a cigarette.  
                  ( subject verb )

1. **An independent clause** is a group of words with a subject-verb unit. We can change the time or tense of the phrase, and one of the words will change (the word that changes is the verb). The subject “doing” the verb is also present.

Example:       Today, birds fly from the tree.  
                  Yesterday, birds flew from the tree.

2. **A dependent clause** is a clause that begins with a subordinator. When we use a subordinator at the beginning of a clause, the clause becomes dependent (or subordinate) and can no longer stand alone as a sentence. **Dependent clauses (subordinate) clauses should always be attached to independent clauses.**

Independent clause:       Mary likes the clown.  
Dependent clause:       because Mary likes the clown

Dependent clause attached to an independent clause to form a complete sentence:  
Because Mary likes the clown, she goes to the circus often.

## IDENTIFYING PHRASES

1. **a group of words without a subject-verb unit.** If we try to change the time or tense of the phrase, we cannot, because it contains no word that changes to show time or tense. It has no verb, so it can't have a subject-verb unit.

Example:       birds from the tree.

2. **-ing phrases.** When you look for verbs in sentences, remember that the *-ing* form of a word cannot be a verb all by itself, so the group of words

the sweat dripping from his forehead

is a phrase, not a clause. To make this phrase into a clause, we need to complete the verb by adding a form of the verb *be*:

Example:       The sweat was dripping from his forehead.

3. **noun + who, noun + which, noun + that phrases.** Even though these structures contain a verb, they are still considered phrases because the noun before the *who*, *which*, or *that* does not have its own verb. These phrases modify nouns in sentences.

Phrase: people who are happy

Sentence: People who are happy often have creative hobbies.

Adapted from Altman, Pam and Doreen Deicke, eds. *Fog City Fundamentals: A Proofreading Skills Book*, Fourth Ed. Edina MN: Burgess, 1998.

**EXERCISE: Underline the verb once and *Italicize the subject* in the following sentences. Remember: a word ending in *ing* is a verb only when it has a helping verb (usually a form of *to be*).**

- 1) My face is red.
- 2) Some of the apples are rotten.
- 3) John and his friend were knocking down a wall.
- 4) A herd of cows was eating in the pasture.
- 5) The parents of my best friend wrecked their car and started crying.
- 6) Up on the stage the punk rocker was making a scene.
- 7) The bus from my hometown will be arriving in twenty minutes.
- 8) Some of the men in the army were shooting at the squirrels.
- 9) The workers took the risk of catching cold by standing in the rain.
- 10) Killing animals was prohibited by law.
- 11) The food on the plate looked good and tasted great.
- 12) Several of my coworkers' children were feeling ill.
- 13) All of them had been eating too much.
- 14) They found the club in a seedy part of town.
- 15) They walked in and the band stopped playing.
- 16) A group of young men in black leather lit cigarettes.
- 17) Smoking was part of the rock and roll image.
- 18) A wide variety of mannequins and robots hung from the walls.
- 19) Their red electronic eyes had witnessed many strange occurrences.
- 20) Many of the people wanted to stay and listen to the music.
- 21) A bunch of drunken people started dancing to the music.