Online Chapter One

Subjects and Predicates

A good first step to controlling your writing is to recognize subjects and predicates, especially the subjects and predicates of the independent clauses that make up the most emphatic part of what you say. This skill is the key to finding your way around the basic structure of sentences, and you’ll need it to make the most of “Naming Definite Actors and Actions” and “Grammatical Variety,” Chapters 8 and 12 in the printed text. The good news is that you already know how to recognize subjects and predicates. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t be able to speak English. But bringing that knowledge up into the light, where you can use it, isn’t always so easy.

Subjects

The subject of a sentence is sometimes called its actor—the person, place, or thing the sentence describes as doing or being something:

Bruno hit Sylvie.

Hal and I saddled the horses.

Opposable thumbs allow humans to grasp tools.

The economic situation looks grim.

Isolated subjects like Bruno are hard to miss. Who hit Sylvie? Bruno. Nothing changes when subjects are doubled or tripled. Who saddled the horses? Hal and I.

Subjects embedded in phrases can be broken down a bit further. What allows humans to grasp tools? Opposable thumbs. What kind of thumbs? Opposable ones.

What looks grim? Some situation. What kind of situation? The economic situation. In these two examples thumb and situation are the one-word, simple subjects.

Opposable and the economic are modifiers that tell us what kind of thumb or situation
the writer means. Simple subjects give you the most basic answer to the question, “Who or what is the actor in this sentence?” Add modifiers and you have a **complete subject**, that is, the simple subject and all the words that go with it:

- The **farmer** in the dell raises artichokes.
- Rising **prices** for everything from food to heating oil ate up our income.
- One of the most striking differences between **them** is their economic views.

As you see, complete subjects can grow long, but there is a simple subject at the heart of each one. A quick and dirty way to chip complicated subjects down to size is to cross out any **prepositional phrases** (phrases made up of prepositions—words like *in, of, around, between, over*, and so on—followed by **nominals**):

- The **farmer** in the dell raises artichokes.
- Rising **prices** for everything from food to heating oil ate up our income.
- One of the most striking differences between **them** is their economic views.

Another signal is that simple subjects are essential. You can’t leave them out without opening a smoking hole in the grammar of the sentence.

- The ______ in the dell raises artichokes.
- Rising ______ for everything related to the cost of oil ate up our income.
- ______ of the most striking differences between them is their economic views.

**SELF TEST 1**

Underline complete subjects and highlight the simple subjects in the following sentences. Prepositional phrases will not be part of the simple subject. You’ll find the answers at the end of this chapter.

1. The distracting sound of heavy machinery echoed through the building.
2. The soft center of a guava tastes a bit like a strawberry.
3. Plumage is highly variable in this polymorphic species.
4. A false start of a garden has yielded a few pale tomato plants dwarfed in a grove of weeds before the house.

5. A long hog house sits off at the east end of the yard.

6. Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in.

7. A chance reader, unsubsidized and unbribed, will dig them up.


**Satchel Paige**

**Standard Sentence Order and “You-Understood”**

In most English sentences the subject comes first. But some (like the one you just read) start with an introductory element like “in most English sentences.” Though these introducers add to the meaning of the sentence, they are not grammatically essential. Leave them out and you still have a sentence left. In the case of “In most English sentences the subject comes first,” that sentence would be “The subject comes first.” However drawn out they become, introductory elements can always be omitted:

- Later we slipped out to sit by the pool.
- After the second-to-last presentation on new depreciation rules, we slipped out to sit by the pool.

Sentences starting with “there is” or “there are” also change the standard sentence order:

- There is a **mouse** in the feed bin.
- There are plenty of **reasons** to prefer flash memory.

In these examples, _there_ is just a place filler, a device to turn the sentence structure around so that the main emphasis falls where it normally wouldn’t—on the real subjects, **MOUSE** and **REAsons**. You’ll find more on this sort of construction in Chapter 10, “Assigning Emphasis.”
Finally, some sentences involving requests or orders may seem to have no subjects at all:

Step lively!

Just think of all those calories.

In both these cases the subject is “you-understood,” the unnamed person to whom the order is directed.

SELF TEST 2

Underline complete subjects and highlight simple subjects in the following sentences. Add “you-understood” subjects in brackets. You’ll find the answers at the end of this chapter.

1. There should be a final decision on the Patterson proposal tomorrow morning.

2. After pruning, rake up and burn the clippings.

3. Even at the polls on election day many voters had not made their final choices.

4. Dented and encrusted with marine growth, the gold cup weighed over a pound.

5. According to an agency official, the FTC has started investigations into deceptive marketing of genetic tests.

6. At the meeting of the East and the Hudson rivers, there is an underwater canyon left over from the runoff of the Continental Glacier.

7. There is certainly a lot of research on computer-based education.

8. According to brokerage surveys cited in National Real Estate Investor, the average office space per worker in the United States dropped from 250 square feet in 2000 to 190 square feet in 2005.
Subjects in Dependent Clauses

A clause is a group of words containing a subject and verb. While all sentences contain subjects and verbs, some have more than one set. Look at this example:

You can’t get spoiled if you do your own ironing.

Meryl Streep

“You” and “can’t get” are the subject and verb of the independent clause You can’t get spoiled, the part that could stand by itself as a complete sentence. But “if you do your own ironing” has a subject and verb too. You is the subject, and do is the verb. “If you do your own ironing” is a dependent clause—meaning it does not stand by itself, but plays a supporting role, adding a telling condition to “You can’t get spoiled.” Independent clauses usually carry the most important content of what you are saying. In fact, Chapter 12, “Grammatical Variety” suggests you deliberately shift less important ideas into dependent constructions. But as Chapters 8 and 9 point out, the subjects of dependent clauses matter too, so it pays to be aware of them.

Types of Dependent Clauses

Dependent clauses do the work of nouns, adjectives, or adverbs in other clauses. In the Meryl Streep sentence, “If you do your own ironing” is adverbial. It tells why or when you can’t get spoiled, an adverb function. Noun and adjective clauses? Here’s a sentence with one of each:

A marriage is always made up of two people who swear that only the other one snores.

Terry Pratchett
“A marriage is always made up of two people” is the independent clause; “who swear that only the other one snores” tells us more about those two people, as an adjective would, and that only the other one snores acts as a noun. It’s the object of the verb swear. What do those people swear? That only the other one snores.

Here are some hallmarks of adjectival, nominal, and adverbial clauses.

**ADJECTIVAL CLAUSES**

- These clauses answer the questions “Which one?” or “What kind?” about a noun.
- They start with one of the relative pronouns—who (or whom), that, or which—and contain a predicate. The pronoun may be left out if it is not the subject of its clause. But if it is present, it always comes first.
  
  The girl whom they mentioned is my sister.
  
  The girl they mentioned is my sister.
  
  The girl that they gave the contract to is my sister.
  
  The girl they gave the contract to is my sister.

- They follow the nouns they modify and can be omitted without wrecking the underlying grammar of the sentence: in the examples above, that underlying sentence would be The girl is my sister.

**NOMINAL CLAUSES**

- Nominal clauses answer the question “Who?” or “What?” with regard to the rest of the clause.
- They start with that or the interrogatives (who, whose, whoever, whom, which, what, where, when, or how) or sometimes if or
whether. (Caution: if and whether can also introduce adverbial clauses.)

What they said is still a mystery to me.

We gave whoever asked our opinion.

I noticed that they ate their share.

How they got in has not been determined.

Whether they got in at all is still unknown.

• They always name a something or someone. Try substituting one of these words for the clause: “Something is still a mystery to me”; “We gave someone our opinion.”

• They generally cannot be omitted without destroying the grammar of the sentence in which they appear.

ADVERBIAL CLAUSES


We’re still going, unless she changed her mind.

As we drove east, they came west to meet us.

Where the road ended, Sandra shouldered her pack and walked on.

They would make small changes whenever we complained.

Because she was late, we put off the starting time.

• They start with a subordinating conjunction. Typical examples:

after

although

as
as far as
as if
as long as
as though
because
before
considering (that)
even if
except (that)
if
in order that
in that
now (that)
on condition (that)
once
provided (that)
seeing (that)
since
so (that)
such that
supposing (that)
than
that
though
till
They can be omitted without destroying the grammar of the sentence in which they appear.

**SELF TEST  3**

Underline the complete subjects and highlight the simple subjects in the following sentences. Each sentence contains more than one clause. Look for subject and verb combinations. Each set you find signals a new clause. If you get confused, try crossing out prepositional phrases. You’ll find the answers at the end of this chapter.

1. Liberty doesn’t work as well in practice as it does in speeches.

   **WILL ROGERS**

2. When I was born, I was so surprised I didn’t talk for a year and a half.

   **GRACIE ALLEN**

3. The first principle is that you must not fool yourself.

   **RICHARD FEYNMAN**

4. When I read about the evils of drinking, I gave up reading.

   **HENNY YOUNGMAN**
5. People always call it luck when you’ve acted more sensibly than they have.

   **ANNE TYLER**

6. If your mother gives you away, you think everybody who comes into your life is going to give you away.

   **EARTHA KITT**

7. This is a night when kings in golden mail ride their elephants over the mountains.

   **JOHN CHEEVER**

8. I’ll make him an offer he can’t refuse.

   **MARIO PUZO**

**Coordinate Clauses**

Coordinate clauses are simply clauses combined into a series, usually by one of the coordinating conjunctions (*and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet*):

- **He huffed and he puffed and he blew the house down.** (Three independent clauses)
- **After we got there but before you came in, we had a talk with Mother.** (Two dependent adverbial clauses followed by an independent clause)
- **I told her to keep quiet, but she wouldn’t because she was shocked and she wanted to know why.** (Two independent clauses and two dependent adverbial clauses. Notice that the *because* applies to both dependent clauses: *because she was shocked* and [*because*] *she wanted to know why.*)

Remember that what makes these constructions clauses is that each one has a subject and a verb. Whenever you see that combination, you’re looking at a clause.
SELF TEST 4

Underline the complete subjects and highlight the simple subjects in the following sentences. Each sentence contains more than one clause. Look for subject and verb combinations. Each set you find signals a new clause. You’ll find the answers at the end of this chapter.

1. When you are logged in to your meeting room and an attendee uses the URL to access it, you are notified immediately.

2. Because its “recipe” of 25 main and trace elements varies from one deposit to the next, pumice, which was widely used as an abrasive in ancient cultures, can usually be traced to a specific volcanic eruption.

3. Whether you think you can or you think you can’t, you’re right.

HENRY FORD

4. Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

5. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Google’s latest Android release was delayed until 2014, but that was what Google intended all along.

6. Because the average person walks thousands of miles in a lifetime, the 26 bones, 33 joints and 100-plus tendons, ligaments and muscles in each foot must absorb enormous strain.

7. The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life.

JANE ADDAMS
8. We act as though comfort and luxury were the chief requirements of life, when all that we need to make us happy is something to be enthusiastic about.

ALBERT EINSTEIN

Predicates

The subject is the someone or something a sentence or clause concerns. The predicate is the comment made about it. The subject is the someone or something that does or is X. That X is the predicate. Just as the complete subject includes the simple subject and the words attached to it, the predicate consists of the verb and all the words that go with it. Dividing your sentences and clauses into these two basic units is a powerful first step toward increasing their effectiveness and coherence.

The subject is the someone or something [that] a sentence or clause concerns.

The predicate is the comment made about it.

The subject is the someone or something that does X or is X.

That X is the predicate.

Look at these verbs. Is, concerns, is, is, does, is, is—a pretty dispirited collection, though to be verbs always crowd into passages geared to definition. Let’s try a more typical passage.

People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices.

ADAM SMITH
People of the same trade / seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation / ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices.

Meet and ends are the verbs in the Adam Smith quotation. The predicates are those verbs and all the words that explain or complete them. Tradespersons meet when? Seldom. Meet how? Together. Meet why? For merriment and diversion.

Conversations end how? In a conspiracy against the public, and so on.

Why should you care about all this? Two reasons: liveliness and coherence. Much of the force of your writing comes from its verbs. As Chapter 8 argues, strong and lively verbs make for strong and lively writing. Knowing where your verbs are is an essential first step toward keeping them forceful.

Then too, subjects and predicates play quite different roles in sentences and paragraphs. Glance back over the last few sets of example sentences. As you see, most clauses are unevenly balanced. Grammatical subjects tend to briefly name what a clause is about, while the meat of the remark, the new information, comes in the predicate. Chapter 9 tells you how to use these traits to keep your sentences linked together, but the process starts with recognizing subjects and predicates.

**SELF TEST 5**

Put a slash between the complete subjects and predicates in the following sentences. The sentences may contain more than one clause. Look for subject and verb combinations. Each set you find signals a new clause. You’ll find the answers at the end of this chapter.

1. I wonder if other dogs think poodles belong to some weird religious cult.  

   **RITA RUDNER**
2. Wireless USB looked like a good bet at first, but the technology never caught on.

3. When the Phoenix Mars Lander became unable to recharge its batteries, it had to be reprogrammed every day because it lost its memory each night.

4. While capitalism is the exploitation of man by man, communism is the exact opposite.

   **BEN LEWIS, Hammer and Tickle**

5. Root cellars could keep potatoes and winter squash from harvest to February or March and onions even longer.

6. Since insurance rarely covers cosmetic surgery, doctors often offer two-for-the-price-of-one specials and even zero-percent financing.

7. I like to fly on an airline right after they’ve had a crash because it improves your odds.

   **GEORGE CARLIN**

8. She said he swept her off her feet, but then he wouldn’t help her up again.

**Multiple Predicates and Predicates in Dependent Clauses**

Just as subjects can be doubled or tripled, so can predicates:

(Hal and I) / saddled the horses. (Two subjects; one predicate)

(Hal) / saddled the horses, / adjusted their bridles, / and led them out of the barn. (One subject, three predicates)
Multiple predicates don’t change the nature of a sentence, but they do influence it.

One key to effective writing is using strong verbs. It helps to know where all of them are.

Of course, every dependent clause has its predicate, too, and each of these predicates has a verb. But the basic principle doesn’t change: every subject-verb combination signals a new clause, and every new clause can be divided into a complete subject and a predicate.

SELF TEST 6

Put a slash between the complete subjects and predicates in the following sentences. Highlight the simple subjects and verbs. The sentences may contain more than one clause, and clauses may contain more than one subject or verb. You’ll find the answers at the end of this chapter.

1. Homer held the rooster by its feet as it flapped wildly and craned its neck, trying to peck him.
2. My cousin Lela is by far the prettiest, but Martha and Corinne are more athletic.
3. Because of the letter I wrote, the mayor made me grounds supervisor.
4. I come from Des Moines; somebody had to.

   BILL BRYSON

5. The coffee there always tastes stale, and I swear they microwave their fried eggs.
6. My sister works out every day after she comes in from school.
7. I bowed deeply and handed my mother the DVD she was so eager to watch.
8. The Romans massed in the Forum near the Tiber while their enemies held the heights.

**Your Writing**

Choose a passage of at least a hundred words written in your usual style. Highlight the simple subjects and verbs, perhaps in different colors. Keep this marked-up paper to analyze after you’ve completed Chapters 8 and 9. Ask yourself at that point whether you named definite actors and actions and whether your passage uses clustered subjects to make your ideas cohere. Then rewrite the passage to see if you can improve its liveliness and coherence.

**Points to Remember**

1. The subject of a sentence or clause is sometimes called its actor—the person, place, or thing the clause describes as doing or being something.

2. Subjects often appear as phrases—complete subjects—in which one word—the simple subject—is the focal point. The simple subject will be the one word or group of words you couldn’t leave out.

3. Predicates consist of the verb and any words that go with it. The verb will be the heart of this phrase, the word or words you couldn’t leave out.

4. Whether dependent or independent, every clause has a subject and predicate.

5. Striking out prepositional phrases is a good way to uncover the basic structure of a sentence or clause.

**Self Test Answers**
SELF TEST 1

Underline complete subjects and highlight the simple subjects in the following sentences. Prepositional phrases will not be part of the simple subject.

1. The distracting sound of heavy machinery echoed through the building.
2. The soft center of a guava tastes a bit like a strawberry.
3. Plumage is highly variable in this polymorphic species.
4. A false start of a garden has yielded a few pale tomato plants dwarfed in a grove of weeds before the house.
5. A long hog house sits off at the east end of the yard.
6. Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in.
7. A chance reader, unsubsidized and unbribed, will dig them up.

SATCHEL PAIGE

SELF TEST 2

Underline complete subjects and highlight simple subjects in the following sentences. Add “you-understood” subjects in brackets.

1. There should be a final decision on the Patterson proposal tomorrow morning.
2. After pruning, [you] rake up and burn the clippings.
3. Even at the polls on election day many voters had not made their final choices.
4. Dented and encrusted with marine growth, the gold cup weighed over a pound.
5. According to an agency official, the FTC has started investigations into deceptive marketing of genetic tests.

6. At the meeting of the East and the Hudson rivers, there is an underwater canyon left over from the runoff of the Continental Glacier.

7. There is certainly a lot of research on computer-based education.

8. According to brokerage surveys cited in National Real Estate Investor, the average office space per worker in the United States dropped from 250 square feet in 2000 to 190 square feet in 2005.

DAVID FRANZ, The Moral Life of Cubicles

SELF TEST 3

Underline the complete subjects and highlight the simple subjects in the following sentences. Each sentence contains more than one clause. Look for subject and verb combinations. Each set you find signals a new clause. If you get confused, try crossing out prepositional phrases.

1. Liberty doesn’t work as well in practice as it does in speeches.

   WILL ROGERS

2. When I was born, I was so surprised I didn’t talk for a year and a half.

   GRACIE ALLEN

3. The first principle is that you must not fool yourself.

   RICHARD FEYNMAN

4. When I read about the evils of drinking, I gave up reading.

   HENNY YOUNGMAN
5. People always call it luck when you’ve acted more sensibly than they have.  
   ANNE TYLER

6. If your mother gives you away, you think everybody who comes into your life is going to give you away.  
   EARTHA KITT

7. This is a night when kings in golden mail ride their elephants over the mountains.  
   JOHN CHEEVER

8. I’ll make him an offer he can’t refuse.  
   MARIO PUZO

SELF TEST 4

Underline the complete subjects and highlight the simple subjects in the following sentences. Each sentence contains more than one clause.

1. When you are logged in to your meeting room and an attendee uses the URL to access it, you are notified immediately.

2. Because its “recipe” of 25 main and trace elements varies from one deposit to the next, pumice, which was widely used as an abrasive in ancient cultures, can usually be traced to a specific volcanic eruption.

3. Whether you think you can or you think you can’t, you’re right.  
   HENRY FORD

4. Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.
5. The Wall Street Journal reported that Google’s latest Android release was delayed until 2014, but that was what Google intended all along.

6. Because the average person walks thousands of miles in a lifetime, the 26 bones, 33 joints and 100-plus tendons, ligaments and muscles in each foot must absorb enormous strain.

7. The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life.

JANE ADDAMS

8. We act as though comfort and luxury were the chief requirements of life, when all that we need to make us happy is something to be enthusiastic about.

ALBERT EINSTEIN

SELF TEST 5

Put a slash between the complete subjects and predicates in the following sentences. The sentences may contain more than one clause. Look for subject and verb combinations. Each set you find signals a new clause.

1. I / wonder if other dogs / think poodles belong to some weird religious cult.

RITA RUDNER

2. Wireless USB / looked like a good bet at first, but the technology / never caught on.
3. When the Phoenix Mars Lander / became unable to recharge its batteries, it / had to be reprogrammed every day because it / lost its memory each night.

4. While capitalism / is the exploitation of man by man, communism / is the exact opposite.

   **BEN LEWIS, *Hammer and Tickle***

5. Root cellars / could keep potatoes and winter squash from harvest to February or March and onions even longer.

6. Since insurance / rarely covers cosmetic surgery, doctors / often offer two-for-the-price-of-one specials and even zero-percent financing.

7. I / like to fly on an airline right after they / ’ve had a crash because it / improves your odds.

   **GEORGE CARLIN**

8. She / said he swept her off her feet, but then he / wouldn’t help her up again.

**SELF TEST 6**

Put a slash between the complete subjects and predicates in the following sentences. Highlight the simple subjects and verbs. The sentences may contain more than one clause, and clauses may contain more than one subject or verb. You’ll find the answers elsewhere on the website.

1. Homer / held the rooster by its feet as it / flapped wildly and craned its neck, trying to peck him.

2. My cousin Lela / is by far the prettiest, but Martha and Corinne / are more athletic.
3. Because of the letter I wrote, the mayor made me grounds supervisor.

4. I come from Des Moines; somebody had to.

   BILL BRYSON

5. The coffee there always tastes stale, and I swear they microwave their fried eggs.

6. My sister works out every day after she comes in from school.

7. I bowed deeply and handed my mother the DVD she was so eager to watch.

8. The Romans massed in the Forum near the Tiber while their enemies held the heights.