

Grammar and Syntax

Grammar — word functions — parts of speech

Grammar is the study of word functions – how words function, how to recognize or use different functions, and how to express ideas clearly by the correct use of words.

Words may fill one of eight functions:

1. Words may name things; naming words are called **nouns**.
 - 1.1. Nouns always appear on horizontal lines in sentence diagrams.
2. Words may refer to things already named; such words are called **pronouns**.
 - 2.1. Pronouns always appear on horizontal lines in sentence diagrams.
3. Words may describe things named; such words are called **adjectives**.
 - 3.1. Adjectives are always placed on slanted lines below their noun.
 - 3.2. A word may simply indicate something named; **articles** do this.
 - 3.3. Articles are always placed on slanted lines in a diagram.
4. Words may name the activity or the "being" of things; such is the work of a **verb**.
 - 4.1. The **participial forms** of verbs (in general, those with suffixes “ed” and “ing”) may be used as nouns (and are then called **gerunds**) or in an adjectival sense (and are then still called participles)
 - 4.1.1. Verbs always appear on horizontal lines when used as verbs
 - 4.1.2. Participial forms used as adjectives appear on slanted lines, curves, or stepped lines.
5. Words may qualify an action by locating it in time or place, or by indicating its manner, degree, or cause; the words which thus qualify verbs are called **adverbs**.
 - 5.1. Adverbs are always placed on slanted lines in diagrams.
6. A word may introduce the use of a noun, not as the primary actor or as the subject of our thoughts, but as the setting of an action; words which introduce a phrase regarding relationships in time or space are called **prepositions**.
 - 6.1. Prepositions are always placed on slanted lines in a diagram. A preposition is the introduction to a phrase including a noun or pronoun. Some words are used as prepositions in one sentence and adverbs in another.
7. A few words are used to mark the creation of a listing; these words are called **coordinate conjunctions**.
 - 7.1. Some words are used to introduce a supporting thought within a single thought unit – These subordination markers are called **subordinating conjunctions**.
 - 7.1.1. Conjunctions of two or more nouns or of two or more verbs are generally on vertical lines.
 - 7.1.2. Conjunctions of several adjectives, or adverbs, or several adjectival or adverbial phrases (which are already slanted) are generally on horizontal lines.

- 7.1.3. Conjunctions between coordinate clauses are placed on a horizontal line set in a vertical element between equal clauses,
- 7.1.4. Conjunctions between a dependent clause and its main clause are generally placed on a dotted slant between.
- 8. Words may express astonishment or other strong feeling; such words are called **interjections**. They really don't participate the structure of a sentence, but they are definitely a part of language.
 - 8.1. Interjections are placed on horizontal lines, above but separated from the sentence they introduce.

Words may move from one functional category to the next, sometimes with the use of a suffix such as the “ly” which changes so many adjectives into adverbs. These functional categories are called *parts of speech*, and each part of speech has a certain role to play in language.

Syntax – Words in Sentences:

Some of the suffixes, however, are related, not to the word as it stands alone, but to the word as it stands *in relation to other words*. After all, words are merely the building blocks of language. This consideration leads us to study the correct and clear manner in which to combine words in sentences, that is, to ***syntax***.

How words change their syntax

Many grammar books give a short definition of nouns – such as “Nouns are words that name things” and then invite the students to list a bunch of nouns. So the students offer: “Dog, cat, tree, milk, pencil, shirt...” You can think of some examples.

Then the text defines verbs as action words and asks the students are invited to list a bunch of these. So students might offer, “Jump, run, skip, play, stir, bump.” All this is very good.

But it is not enough...

Think: when a dog “trees” a cat, the word “tree” is suddenly a verb, not a noun. Do you see that? And when we milk a cow, “milk” is a verb, not a noun. And when we “pencil in” a correction, “pencil” is a verb, not a noun.

Furthermore, if I go to the field day at school, and my child jumps higher than anyone, I say, “That was a great jump!!!” and now “jump” is a noun in my sentence, not a verb. Later, I may say that the printer is doing a run of my book; then “run” is a noun, a thing, not an action, a verb. And I might go to a “play” and there might be a “bump” in the road; now play and bump are nouns, not verbs.

So we learn about nouns and verbs, and it's good, but we have to understand that words can slip around from one part of speech to another depending on how they are used in a sentence. In fact, that is a normal function of language.

But here's the point: How words are used in a sentence is syntax.

That is the point of diagramming. Don't get stuck on the idea that "milk" is a noun and "red" is an adjective, because *in one particular sentence*, milk may be a verb, and red may be a noun because that is the way that the word relationships work. (Red is my favorite color.)

With all this tumult of information, are you going bananas? Think about it. Is bananas a noun, an adverb, or an adjective?

Ordinarily, it is a noun, no question about that. But *in this sentence*, it appears to be an adverb, (it answers the question "where" in a metaphorical sense) or it may be interpreted as a predicate adjective, with "are going" being a linking verb. ("Go" is not on any list of linking verbs, of course, but it is used here in the sense of "becoming," which is a linking verb.) If you don't know what a linking verb is, just wait.

Or one might argue that "going bananas" is a new verb. The main point is that "bananas" isn't being used simply as a plural noun here.

What a surprise!

Grammar is the study of the correct forms of words for expressing time, gender, plurality, and whatnot.

Syntax is the study of the relationships among words *in the sentences in which they are found*.

The study grammar overlaps with the study of syntax because some words change their forms when they change their relationships to other words. Adjectives often add "ly" when they become adverbs. It's bad grammar to say, "You're going slow", because the syntax calls for an adverb: "You're going slowly."

Defining a sentence:

A sentence is a sequence of words whose relationships express a unit of thought.

We do not say a sentence is "a group of words" because for example, "sing-up-travel-gingko" is a group of words, and it is not a sentence. "Jack me like never" is a group of words which may, in context, express a complete thought, but the sequence is confusing. A wrong sequence can make the meaning ambiguous. Does Jack never like me, or does "me" never like Jack? In English, words have to be in the right sequence to express a definite unit of thought.

(An indefinite unit of thought is not really a unit of *thought*, is it?)

Nor can we say that "a sentence expresses a 'complete' thought". How complete is, "Come!" or, "I won't!" These are sentences, although they are very incomplete as thoughts. They need the context of other sentences. But a sentence is a *unit* of thought. It

stands alone to express a meaningful unit of thought; once that is absorbed, we can add another unit until the thought is complete.

Now that we have a definition of sentence, we can speak of syntax:

Syntax is the study of word relationships within sentences.

*In the sequence of words called a sentence,
each word unit in the sequence has a particular relationship
to the other parts and to the whole
so as to help express that unit of thought clearly.*

There are two things we must always find in each sentence:

1. Every thought is about something. In a sentence, the word which names what the thought is about is called the **subject**.

Every sentence has a subject.

We may have thoughts about

- *Our friends and enemies*
- *Our homes and places we visit*
- *Our pets, our farm animals, or about wild animals*
- *All sorts of things that we touch and work with.*

2. Every sentence describes the being, doing, experiencing, or expectation of the subject. This portion of the sentence is called the predicate. In the center of the predicate's meaning is a **verb**.

Every sentence has a verb.

A thought may be about

- *What the subject is like, or*
- *What the subject does, or*
- *What the subject experiences, or*
- *What we hope or expect of the subject.*

This pair of requirements is the classical first lesson in English composition, so now we can say:

Every sentence has a subject and a verb.

Therefore:

**A sentence is a sequence of words
whose relationships express a unit of thought;**

and a unit of thought has a subject,
which is what we are talking about,
and a predicate
which is what we want to say about the subject.

Language is the communication of thoughts, and it is made of sentences in which we express our *thoughts about things*, or, to put it in the classic-philosophic way: our *predications of various subjects*.

A Definition:

What makes a definition?

A definition should
clearly, accurately, and exclusively
designate the thing defined.

As far as the sentence being “a group of words that makes complete sense” (one common definition) or “a group of words expressing a complete thought” (another common definition) these are reasonable ways to introduce the discussion of the sentence, but neither is a good definition of the sentence. There is a difference. An introduction starts a discussion with something simple that gives us a sense of direction, but in a definition, each word counts, and in the end, you know precisely what you are talking about; furthermore, a good definition cannot be applied to anything except what is defined. The definition, “a sentence is a group of words that makes complete sense” has several weaknesses:

1. The word “group” doesn’t add anything to the definition. It flows, but it is not an exact word; it is empty as far as definition goes. Anyway, some sentences have only one word. Watch.
2. The definition is too loose since it might just as accurately describe a paragraph or an essay, not exclusively a sentence. What does “complete” mean?
3. It is not clear whether the definition would include nonsense sentences, since in fact they don’t make “complete sense”. “Twas brillig and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe...” It does not make sense, but it is a sentence!

Since these introductory definitions are neither clear nor exclusive, and since the first contains an empty word, and the second an ambiguous word, they are not a good definitions.

The New Definition:

A sentence is a sequence of words
whose relationships express a unit of thought.

On sequence

What do you think – do we just talk with words, or is there something else we need?

Of course, you have to put the words together carefully so they will make sense. If I say, “The boots are in the corner,” is it the same as “Boots corner in the are the”?

What have I done wrong? I used the same words. “The boots are in the corner,” uses just the same words as “Boots corner in the are the”?

But the second group of words is in the wrong order and that is very important. A good sentence has its words in the right order for its meaning. One type of order is sequence, and we will use that word because it means the kind of order where things follow after the other in a specific way. Since we say our words one after the other, a sentence is a sequence of words, not just a group of words or a box of words.

Incidentally, Latin and other highly inflected languages do not rely quite as heavily on sequence as English does. Still, they do put their prepositions at the head of a prepositional phrase and their conjunctions between things they join, so even in these languages, a sentence is still a sequence of words.

On relationships

There is something special about the sequence. Look at these two sentences.

My feet are in my shoes.
My shoes are in my feet.

These sentences use the same words, but their meaning is different; and the second is nonsense.

Here’s another pair:

The lion chases the rabbit.
The rabbit chases the lion.

That would be quite a rabbit, wouldn’t it? Again, the sentences have the same words and a grammatically reasonable sequence, but the meaning is different.

Sequence and relationship

Here are two more:

I told you, “On Thursday, I will see you.”
I told you on Thursday, “I will see you.”

Here are two different sentences with their words in the same order. Do they mean the same thing? Look carefully. Listen carefully.

When I say: I told you, [pause] ‘On Thursday, I will see you,’ you can expect to see me *on Thursday*.

Now, listen to the second sentence: I told you on Thursday, [pause] ‘I will see you,’ then you do not know when I will see you, but certainly I will come, just as I promised on Thursday.

The words are the same, and even the sequence of words is the same; but the meaning is different because the syntax is different; the word relationships are different.

The problem is with the words “on Thursday”. In the first sentence, “on Thursday” is telling us *when I will see you* and in the second sentence “on Thursday” is telling you *when I told you* something. The question is whether “On Thursday” goes with the seeing or with the telling. Which verb does it modify?

In every sentence, we have some main words and some words that expand the main words and some words that expand the words in the expansions. When we look at the expanding words, like the phrase “on Thursday,” we need to know which of the main words it refers to. That is what I mean when I say that in a sentence it is very important to know *how the words are related*. Always remember that the meaning of a sentence is not just from the words, and not just from the sequence of the words, but from understanding the relationship between the words.

Most of the time, English speakers figure out the relationships between words from the sequence. Remember:

The lion chases the rabbit *vs*
The rabbit chases the lion.

Here, the different relationships are signaled by the sequence. But sometimes the difference comes from the something else. We have to hear it, or we need the right punctuation; and we have to think. In a well-written sentence, it is possible to know the thought!

On Thoughts:

To explain the concept of “a unit of thought” you need to have taken the classical first step in composition education by talking about the sentence having a subject and a verb. In other words, you need to talk about the sentence *as a thought*, before you talk about the more subtle idea of *a unit of thought*.

Let’s remind ourselves;

*A sentence is a sequence of words
whose relationships express a unit of thought.*

And furthermore:

Every sentence has a subject and a verb.

So language is for our thoughts: in every sentence people learn what topic we are thinking about and something particular that we want them to know about it.

On a “unit of thought”

What do I mean by “a unit of thought”?

In math, a unit is just one: in English, a unit of thought is a single thought.

We can say, “Peter has a pumpkin” and that is one thought; we can say, “Give me a pencil,” and that is another thought.

Examples

What about this?

“The dog chases the cat and the cat chases the mouse.”

One can certainly see two thoughts:

“The dog chases the cat” is a thought.

“The cat chases the mouse,” is another thought.

This sentence has two equal parts, two clauses, as we will learn, each of which *could* stand alone as one thought, each of which would make a good sentence. But notice how the word “and” changes the thought just a little by telling us to put those two thoughts together so that our minds *explore this pair* of ideas as a single thought that could be put this way:

Lots of animals chase each other;
and sometimes there seems to be a chasing order, such as;
dogs chase cats and cats chase mice.

Looking at it this way, we see that the unit of thought which is being offered is a little different from the parts (we call them clauses) taken alone. The two clauses are not just two thoughts; they are one thought with two parts.

Here’s another sentence to consider:

I came when you called.

This expresses just one thought, but you could divide the sequence of words and make two sentences:

I came.
You called.

Of course you'd be leaving out the word "when" and it is the word "when" that makes the thought "you called" a kind of background for "I came." So again, we have just one thought, even though we have: first one subject and verb, then another subject and verb. In this case, the word "when" makes a stronger relationship, a kind of dependency of meaning, between the two clauses. It is more obvious that we have just one thought.

We still have only one unit of thought.

**A sentence is a sequence of words,
whose relationships express a unit of thought.**