

Understanding English Sentence Structure

To understand correct sentence structure, you need to understand how sentences are organised grammatically. This explains the basis of English sentence structure – subjects and verbs. Most sentences in English follow the pattern below:

Subject + verb + words that complete the thought of the sentence

<u>Subject</u>	<u>Verb</u>	<u>Direct object</u>
Esteban	won	the race.

<u>Subject</u>	<u>Verb</u>	<u>Subject complement</u>
The cake	looks	delicious.

The core of the sentence is the connection between the subject and verb which gives the sentence its essential meaning. If you can recognise subjects and verbs you are on your way to creating sentences that express your ideas clearly and correctly. So how do you recognise verbs?

One way to recognise verbs is to know what they do. A verb can express:

- A physical or mental action – run, write, take, give, think, hope.
- A state of being – be, seem, look.
- A state of owning – have, possess, own.
- A sensation – feel, smell, taste.

Note – some verbs can express more than one thing depending on how they are used. Look at the differences in the meaning of look and taste:

I looked at him in total amazement. (Looked expresses an action.)
You look tired today. (Look expresses a state of being.)

Meg tasted the soup. (Tasted expresses an action.)
The soup tastes salty. (Tastes expresses a state of being.)

Another way to recognise a verb is to look for the word(s) in the sentence whose form will change if you change the time of the sentence. For example, from present to past or future:

Francisca eats lunch at noon.

To find the verb, change the time of the sentence:

Yesterday, Francisca ate lunch at noon.
Tomorrow, Francisca will eat lunch at noon.

The word in the first sentence that changes form is eats. Therefore 'eat' is the verb.

So how do we recognise subjects? The easiest way is to first find the verb. Then look for the word(s) in front of the verb that answer the question who? or what?

Diego wants a new DVD player for Christmas.

- a. Find the verb by changing the time of the sentence – Diego will want a new DVD player for Christmas. (The change is in 'will want').
- b. The verb in the original sentence is wants.
- c. Ask, "Who wants a new DVD player for Christmas?"
- d. The answer to the question is Diego. Therefore Diego is the subject.

Skiing in the mountains is dangerous in the spring.

- a. Change the time. Skiing in the mountains was dangerous in the spring.
- b. The verb in the original sentence is 'is'.
- c. Ask, "What is dangerous in the spring?"
- d. The subject is skiing.

Special cases! There are many exceptions to this. Examples that do not follow the standard pattern:

Sentences that express a request or a command. In these sentences, the subject is not stated but is understood to be 'you'. The sentence is asking the reader/listener (the 'you') to do something. It is possible in this case to have a one-word sentence:

Stop!

Help! Each of these words is a verb and the subject of each is 'you'. Each of these constructions is therefore a complete sentence.

Run!

Here are other examples of request or command sentences in which 'you' is understood to be the subject:

Turn to page 23.

Wait for me at the entrance to the restaurant.

Go to the store for some milk.

Sentences that begin with here or there. In these sentences here and there are not subjects. In fact, in such sentences the subject comes after the verb:

Verb	Subject
Here <u>are</u>	the new <u>office supplies</u> .

Verb Subject

There is Rosa at the door.

In questions. In most questions, the subject comes either after the verb (if the verb is one word) or between parts of the verb (if the verb consists of more than one word):

Verb Subject

What is your name?

Verb S Verb

Where do you live?