Basic Sentence Patterns for Be and Linking Verbs

After completing Chapter 1, you know that one way to analyze sentences is to label each word as a part of speech. But we are now going to move beyond parsing to more useful methods of sentence analysis.

LOCATING AND LABELING ESSENTIAL SENTENCE PARTS

Not all words within a sentence are equal; while some are essential for basic meaning, others are optional. In Chapters 2 and 3 we will learn to identify essential sentence parts and to call them by terms that other grammarians would recognize.

CATEGORIZING SENTENCES ACCORDING TO BASIC PATTERNS

Grammarians of the twentieth century came to realize that the English language (indeed, all languages) could be described simply by categorizing the limited number of sentence patterns used by the speakers of the language. Although these patterns can be transformed in various ways, expanded upon, and combined, a grasp of the most basic patterns is extremely helpful. You should be aware that grammar texts may vary in the number of basic sentence patterns they describe, or in exactly how they describe the patterns. What is most important is to understand that the number of basic sentence patterns is finite, and that this foundation allows us to build more and more complex sentence structures. Chapters 2 and 3 will introduce you to ten basic patterns that will fit almost all English sentence structures. Chapter 2 will address the first five patterns, those using state of being or existence verbs. In the first three sentence patterns, the main verb is a form of be, while the remaining two structures contain linking verbs. In Chapter 3 we will move on to action verbs, with one sentence pattern determined by an intransitive verb and the remaining four patterns built around a transitive verb.

DIAGRAMING

A third way to analyze a sentence is to utilize a diagraming technique. Diagraming allows us to see a sentence spatially, to place each word in its appropriate place as though sentence parts
were pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. In the late nineteenth century, scholars developed a number of ways to sketch out a sentence visually. Eventually the Reed–Kellogg system of diagramming, now known as traditional diagramming, became the most popular visual representation of a sentence and the only nineteenth-century system to endure to the present. Alternative methods of diagramming have since been developed. Currently a popular method is “tree diagramming” (illustrated below), in which a sentence is split into smaller and smaller branches to reflect the relationship of each branch to the rest of the “tree”:

![Tree Diagram of a Sentence]

Diagraming is logical and especially helpful for visual learners, who can see the sentence in non-linear fashion, with sentence elements spatially related to one another. In addition, kinetic learners, puzzle lovers, and those with a penchant for putting things in their place typically find diagraming simultaneously challenging and satisfying. Diagraming forces us beyond rote memory of grammar definitions, beyond repetitive grammar and usage exercises, into the realm of application, where every word in a sentence must take its place in the diagram.

In this text we will concentrate on traditional diagraming. Although it does have some limitations, traditional diagraming is a sophisticated tool for sentence analysis. Manipulating individual words forces us to analyze each word as a part of speech, to isolate the essential sentence parts, and to determine the relationship of the essential sentence parts to one another. A distinct advantage of traditional diagraming is that it is the method most often used in schools. You may find it familiar, even if you had limited exposure to it as a student, and it will be helpful to prospective and practicing teachers (including parents helping children with homework) as another tool for language instruction. Even if the official curriculum does not require it, teachers and students often find that traditional diagraming is an excellent supplementary tool for understanding how sentences are constructed.

Our method in this chapter will be to integrate all three methods of sentence analysis. We begin by categorizing a sentence into its basic sentence pattern, describing its essential parts, and diagraming it. However, you do not need to follow the steps in this order for accurate sentence analysis. Many students begin by diagraming the sentence, using that as a tool for determining the essential sentence parts, and then pinning down the sentence pattern. Here, for handy reference, is an overview of the ten basic sentence patterns, along with an example for each:

1. subject – be verb – adverb of time or place
   The king is here.

2. subject – be verb – predicate adjective (subjective complement)
   The king will be generous.
3. subject – be verb – predicate noun (subjective complement)
The king is a friend.

4. subject – linking verb – predicate adjective (subjective complement)
The king seems unhappy.

5. subject – linking verb – predicate noun (subjective complement)
The king became a tyrant.

6. subject – intransitive verb
The king coughed.

7. subject – transitive verb – direct object
The king proclaimed the news.

8. subject – transitive verb – indirect object – direct object
The king gave Anne Boleyn his love.

9. subject – transitive verb – direct object – adjective (objective complement)
The king considered Anne enchanting.

10. subject – transitive verb – direct object – noun (objective complement)
The king considered Anne a beauty.

Notice that these formulas identify only the essential elements of a sentence. Typically, a sentence will also contain many “extras,” necessary for semantic but not grammatical reasons. In other words, although “The king proclaimed the news” is an example of a Pattern 7 sentence, most sentences in English will contain many additional words that impart meaning but are not essential in terms of grammar:

In 1534 the king, Henry VIII, proclaimed with joy the news of his divorce from Katherine of Aragon.

For more convenient reference, we’ll use shorthand formulas for the ten basic sentence patterns. We will also break the ten patterns into two groups, with sentences built around be and linking verbs grouped together in this chapter, and sentences built around action verbs (intransitive and transitive) in the following chapter. Notice how the placement of the formulas below can help you see the correspondences between certain patterns. Patterns 2 and 4, and Patterns 3 and 5, are identical except for the type of verb, and Patterns 8, 9, and 10 build in different ways upon the sentence kernel of Pattern 7. Patterns 1 and 6 stand out as being different from all the others.

1. s – be – adv/tp
2. s – be – pa
3. s – be – pn
4. s – lv – pa
5. s – lv – pn
6. s – itv
7. s – tv – do
8. s – tv – io – do
9. s – tv – do – adj
10. s – tv – do – n
Before we begin breaking sentences into essential components, however, let's take a quick look at how each sentence first breaks into two parts: the complete subject (what the sentence is about) and the complete predicate (what is being said about the subject). The complete subject includes the simple subject (typically a noun or pronoun) and all of its modifiers; the complete predicate includes the verb and all of its complements, objects, and modifiers. In the sentences below, a vertical line separates the complete subject from the complete predicate. The simple subject and the verb are italicized.

The box of tissues on the counter | had become soggy from the leaking roof.

No one in the room | ever understood a word of the teacher’s lecture.

**EXERCISE 2.1**

Follow four steps for each sentence below:

a. Draw a vertical line between the complete subject and the complete predicate.

b. Circle all prepositional phrases. You will never find the simple subject or the verb of a sentence within a prepositional phrase, and so eliminating prepositional phrases will help you locate the subject and verb. Also, although exceptions do occur, usually prepositional phrases function as adjectives or adverbs that are non-essential grammatical elements.

c. Underline the simple subject once and the verb twice.

d. Cross out all remaining non-essential words in the sentence, leaving only those words necessary for a grammatically complete sentence conveying the basic intended meaning. (Skip this step if it seems too difficult. We will be distinguishing between essential and non-essential words as we work our way through the ten basic patterns one at a time.)

1. Photographs of children in various settings adorn the walls of the gallery.

2. I have improved my writing skills.

3. Gratitude and self-discipline are signs of maturity.

4. The people of the village were angry about the increased taxes.

5. The clerk in our office should have been aware of the growing technical difficulties of the job.
Once we understand that each sentence breaks into two parts, and that each part is built around a simple subject and a verb, we are ready to take a closer look at the ten basic sentence patterns.

**Patterns 1, 2, and 3: The "Be" Patterns**

- **Pattern 1:** s - be - adv/tp
- **Pattern 2:** s - be - pa
- **Pattern 3:** s - be - pn

The **most important feature of the first three patterns is that they all contain the be verb**; that is, some form of the verb be (am, is, are, was, were, being, been) is used as the main verb. Remember that be can also be used as a helping verb, but to qualify for one of these three patterns, the be form must come last in the verb phrase.

He must be going to a nearby college. ("Be" serves as a helping verb because the final word in the verb phrase is "going," an action verb.)

His college must be nearby. (Here "be" is the final word in the verb phrase and so the sentence contains a be verb.)

**Remember that any sentence with be as its main verb must have some element to follow in order to complete the idea of the sentence.** In Pattern 1, be is followed by an adverb that indicates the time or the place that something or someone exists.

The king is here.

The king is on the throne. (Remember that a prepositional phrase can function as an adverb, so you may find a prepositional phrase, not a single-word adverb, completing the idea of the be verb.)

Patterns 2 and 3 complete the be verb with a **subjective complement** (an element that "completes" the subject by modifying or renaming it). There are **two types of subjective complements: predicate adjectives and predicate nouns** (also known as predicate nominatives). **Pattern 2 completes the idea of the sentence with a subjective complement in the form of a predicate adjective.** The adjective modifies the subject of the sentence. (If "modifies" is a confusing term for you, then replace it with "points back to" or "describes" the subject of the sentence. "Modifies" is the preferred term for linguists because it indicates that our understanding of one word is changed by the influence upon it of another word.)

The king is happy.

The king is in a good mood. (Remember that a prepositional phrase can function as an adjective, so in this pattern you may find a prepositional phrase, not a single-word adjective, completing the idea of the be verb.)

**Pattern 3 completes the idea of the sentence with a subjective complement in the form of a predicate noun.** The predicate noun renames the subject of the sentence.

The king is Henry VIII.
**EXERCISE 2.2**

See if you can determine whether the following sentences follow Pattern 1 (s - be - adv/tp), Pattern 2 (s - be - pa), or Pattern 3 (s - be - pn). To locate the subject and verb, it will help if you circle prepositional phrases first. **You will never find a subject or verb of a sentence inside a prepositional phrase.** At the same time, remember that a prepositional phrase can serve as an adverb or a predicate adjective to complete the idea of the *be* verb.

1. The stapler is on the desk. 
2. My cat is a lover of tuna. 
3. The music is extremely loud. 
4. The graduation party is today. 
5. That child is being unreasonable. 
6. Her favorite picture from the vacation in Florida is a snapshot of a playful dolphin. 

*see answer key p. 359*

Now let's consider how to diagram the first three sentence patterns. Every diagram begins with a base line, split in two, that contains the simple subject and verb of the sentence.

```
subject  verb
```

The complete subject (the subject and all of its modifiers) is then diagramed on the left side of the dividing line, while the complete predicate (the verb and all of its modifiers) is diagramed on the right.

**Pattern 1: subject - be verb - adverb of time or place (s - be - adv/tp)**

The adverb that completes the idea of the *be* verb is diagramed beneath the verb.

```
subject  be verb
          adverb
          king
          The
          is
          here
```

**Pattern 2: subject - be verb - subjective complement: predicate adjective (s - be - pa)**

The predicate adjective is diagramed on the base line, with a diagonal or slash line *before* it to indicate that the adjective points back to (modifies) the subject. It might help to think of this...
slash line as an arrow referring back to the subject, or as the curve of a circle showing the close relationship between the subject and the subjective complement. We can use this "circle test" to confirm that what follows the verb is a subjective complement.

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>subject</th>
<th>be verb</th>
<th>predicate adjective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>king</td>
<td>is</td>
<td>generous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```

**Pattern 3: subject - be verb - subjective complement: predicate noun (s - be - pn)**

The predicate noun is also diagramed on the base line, with a diagonal or slash line before it to indicate that the noun renames the subject. Again, think of the slash line as an arrow pointing back to the subject, or as the curve of a circle drawing together the predicate noun and the subject (the "circle test" once more).

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>subject</th>
<th>be verb</th>
<th>predicate noun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>king</td>
<td>is</td>
<td>friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The</td>
<td></td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```

Modifiers (adjectives, adverbs, prepositional phrases serving as adjectives and adverbs) are diagramed on diagonal lines beneath the words they modify. Prepositional phrases are diagramed as units in structures that place the preposition on a diagonal line, with the object of the preposition on an adjoining horizontal line and modifiers beneath the horizontal line. Frequently prepositional phrases occur in chains, so that one prepositional phrase is diagramed beneath another. This happens when the second prepositional phrase modifies the object of the first prepositional phrase, as in the final sentence in this exercise ("the vacation in Florida"). Here are complete diagrams for the sentences above, in Exercise 2.2:

1. The stapler is on the desk.

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>stapler</th>
<th>is</th>
<th>on</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The</td>
<td></td>
<td>desk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```
2. My cat is a lover of tuna.

3. The music is extremely loud.

4. The graduation party is today.

5. That child is being unreasonable.

6. Her favorite picture from the vacation in Florida is a snapshot of a playful dolphin.

There is one problem. What happens when the predicate adjective is in the form of a prepositional phrase? How can a prepositional phrase fit on the base line? In this case, we use a "pedestal" or "tower" to accommodate the prepositional phrase structure. Let's compare the two sentences below, which have the same basic meaning but use two different structures. The first sentence is completed by a single-word adjective; the second sentence is completed by a prepositional phrase used as an adjective.
The king is happy.

The king is in a good mood.

Remember that you will need a pedestal only when the prepositional phrase is the predicate adjective—in other words, when it is essential for the grammatical sense of the sentence—and when the prepositional phrase takes the place of what would normally be a single-word adjective on the base line of the diagram. If the prepositional phrase is an adverb, it is diagramed beneath the verb. If it is a non-essential adjective, one that can be omitted without harming sentence completeness, then diagram the prepositional phrase beneath the word it modifies.

The king is on the throne. (adverb in a Pattern 1 sentence)

The king on the throne is Henry VIII. (non-essential modifier of “king” in a Pattern 3 sentence)

The king is out of breath. (predicate adjective in a Pattern 2 sentence because these words would not form a sentence without the prepositional phrase; also, “out of breath” can be replaced by the single-word predicate adjective “breathless”)

EXERCISE 2.3

For the sentences below, identify the sentence pattern as Pattern 1, 2, or 3, and then diagram each sentence.

1. The bread on the table is stale.

2. The officers at the academy should be strict.

3. The officers at the academy should be strict disciplinarians.
4. Our professor must have been a genius in her youth.

5. The mechanic is under the car.

6. The car is under warranty.

Patterns 4 and 5 • The "Linking Verb" Patterns

A linking verb is a verb that can be replaced by a be verb. Some textbooks subsume the be verb under the linking verb category because all of these verbs act in the same way, to join the subject to another element that follows the verb. Remember from Chapter 1 that linking verbs include verbs of sense (look, sound, feel, taste, smell) and verbs such as become, appear, remain, grow, stay, seem. Remember also that some of these verbs can function as action verbs, so you must determine if you can use be as a replacement before labeling a word as a linking verb.
The king looks unhappy.
(In this sentence, "looks" is a linking verb because no action is taking place and you can replace it with "is"—The king is unhappy.)

The king looks with disdain at the court.
(In this sentence, "looks" is an action verb and cannot be replaced with "is.")

The two linking verb patterns are identical, except that the form of the subjective complement differs. Pattern 4 ends with a predicate adjective, while Pattern 5 ends with a predicate noun. Remember that this was the only distinction between Patterns 2 and 3 also. Thus Pattern 2 and Pattern 4 are identical, except that Pattern 2 uses a be verb and Pattern 4 uses a linking verb. Pattern 3 and Pattern 5 are identical, except that Pattern 3 uses a be verb and Pattern 5 uses a linking verb. All of these patterns are diagramed identically, since in the diagram no distinction is made between an adjective or a noun used as a subjective complement:

```
subject     be or linking verb    subjective complement
            (either a predicate adjective or predicate noun)
```

**Pattern 4: subject - linking verb - predicate adjective / subjective complement**

(*s - lv - pa*)

The king seems unhappy.

```
king          seems               unhappy
            The
```

As in Pattern 2, a Pattern 4 sentence can end with a prepositional phrase that acts as the predicate adjective. When this happens, the predicate adjective must be diagramed on a pedestal. Remember that a pedestal is required only when the prepositional phrase is necessary to complete the sentence and that the prepositional phrase can usually be replaced by a single-word adjective modifying the subject.

The king seems **out of sorts**. (The prepositional phrase must be diagramed on a pedestal because it is essential to complete the sentence and can be replaced by a single-word adjective such as "upset" or "angry.")

```
king          seems               out of sorts
            The
```
**Pattern 5: subject - linking verb - predicate noun / subjective complement**

(*s - lv - pn*)

Pattern 5 is diagramed exactly as Patterns 2, 3, and 4.

The king became a tyrant.

```
king \became tyrant
  The a
```
SUMMARY OF KEY CONCEPTS IN CHAPTER 2

1. Each sentence can be broken into two large components, the complete subject and the complete predicate.

2. The verb is the most important element of the sentence in terms of distinguishing its sentence pattern.

3. When a form of the be verb acts as the main verb of a sentence, three sentence patterns are possible:
   a. The sentence may end with an adverb of time or place. (Pattern 1)
   b. The sentence may end with an adjective relating back to the subject. (Pattern 2)
   c. The sentence may end with a noun renaming the subject. (Pattern 3)

4. We can identify a linking verb by replacing it with a form of the be verb without substantially changing the sense of the sentence. When a linking verb acts as the main verb of a sentence, two sentence patterns are possible:
   a. The sentence may end with an adjective relating back to the subject. (Pattern 4)
   b. The sentence may end with a noun renaming the subject. (Pattern 5)

5. In the diagram, a diagonal or slash line following the verb indicates that what follows is a subjective complement—that is, it is an adjective or noun that relates back to the subject. The diagonal line can be seen as an arrow pointing back to the subject or as the curve of a circle drawing the subject and subjective complement together.

6. In Patterns 2 and 4, use a pedestal when a prepositional phrase acts as the subjective complement (when it is necessary to complete the sentence and can be replaced by a single-word adjective that would ordinarily be placed on the base line).
CHAPTER 2 EXERCISE

1. Follow these steps for the sentences below:
   a. Circle all prepositional phrases.
   b. Underline the simple subject once and the verb twice.
   c. Identify the verb as a be verb or a linking verb.
   d. Determine the sentence pattern number of the sentence. If the sentence contains a be verb, it falls into a Pattern 1, 2, or 3 sentence; if it contains a linking verb, it must be a Pattern 4 or 5 sentence:

   PATTERN 1: s – be – adv/tp
   PATTERN 3: s – be – pn
   PATTERN 5: s – lv – pn

   PATTERN 2: s – be – pa
   PATTERN 4: s – lv – pa

e. Diagram the sentence.

1. The party is here.

2. The computer on the desk was new.
3. The computer was on the desk.

4. The farewell present should have been John's idea.

5. The new perfume smelled delightful.

6. Flies are a nuisance during a picnic.
7. Candy can be harmful in large quantities.

8. Our business venture gradually became an embarrassment.

9. The pink slipper was under the bed.

10. After ten minutes Theresa’s face grew red with impatience.
II. Answer the questions below.

a. What is the only difference between a Pattern 2 and a Pattern 3 sentence?

b. What is the only difference between a Pattern 2 and a Pattern 4 sentence, or between a Pattern 3 and a Pattern 5 sentence?

c. What does the slash mark in Patterns 2 through 5 indicate in the sentence diagram?

d. How can you determine if a prepositional phrase should be diagramed on a pedestal? At this point, which two sentence patterns might have diagrams containing a pedestal?

e. How can you test for a linking verb?