

An Introduction to Sentence Analysis

“Sentence analysis” is the term I use for a simple system of notation and identification of the basic parts of a sentence. This kind of analysis of a sentence can help you in a number of ways:

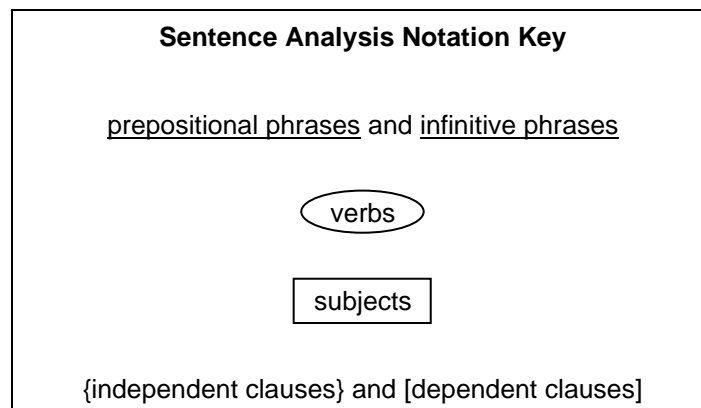
1. **Identifying its most important elements** (and trimming the sentence down to its essence)
2. **Understanding how the sentence is constructed** (its parts and how they fit together)
3. **Recognizing errors** in subject-verb agreement, pronoun case, punctuation, etc.

In doing sentence analysis, I focus on four basic elements or aspects of the sentence:

1. **Prepositional phrases** and **infinitive phrases** (the most common extraneous elements)
2. **Verbs**
3. **Subjects**
4. **Clauses** (independent and dependent)

I call prepositional and infinitive phrases “extraneous” elements here because they can be distractions that make it more difficult to correctly identify subjects and verbs. By identifying them, you can be more confident that your analysis of the more fundamental elements of the sentence is correct.

Identifying these elements in this order will help you avoid mistakes.



Prepositional Phrases

Preposition: A word indicating location, position, direction, or relation

between two ferns
along the road
with a friend

- Prepositions are followed by **objects**, and together (along with any accompanying modifiers) they form **prepositional phrases** like the examples listed above.
- With very rare exceptions, **subjects** and **verbs** do not occur within prepositional phrases.
- For a more detailed explanation of prepositions and a thorough list of prepositions in English, see the [Prepositions](#) page.

Infinitive Phrases

Infinitive: The verb form beginning with *to* by which we name verbs (e.g., *to be*, *to teach*, *to think*)

to kill a mockingbird

to expect the unexpected

to run quickly

- *To* is a **preposition** when it is followed by an object (e.g., “to the moon”); it is only part of an infinitive when it is followed by a base verb form (e.g., *be*).
- Infinitives can also take **objects** and **modifiers**, and together they form **infinitive phrases** like the examples listed above.
- However, many infinitives are **intransitive** and do not take objects.
- Infinitives never act as **verbs** in a sentence because they have no tense, and **subjects** are never found within infinitives.
- However, infinitives and infinitive phrases can act as nouns, so sometimes they act as subjects, objects, and **predicate nominatives**. In the sentence below, “to know her” is the subject, *is* is the verb, and “to love her” is a predicate nominative:

To know her is to love her.

Verbs

Verb: The action done by the subject (active voice) or to the subject (passive voice)

The cat **ate** the mouse. (active voice)

The mouse **was eaten**. (passive voice)

The mouse **was** helpless. (linking verb)

- **Linking verbs** are special verbs that don’t tell actions; they are used to introduce more information about the subject. Some examples are *to be*, *to become*, *to feel*, *to seem*, *to look*, *to taste*, *to sound*, and *to smell*. Most linking verbs are sensory verbs that can also function as action verbs in some situations.
- The most common verb in English is the linking verb *to be*. It is extremely important that you be able to identify it quickly and easily. Memorize the following forms: *is*, *are*, *am*, *was*, *were*, *be*, *being*, *been*.
- In a **clause**, a word functioning as a verb always has a **tense** (past, present, or future), so verb forms such as **infinitives** (and sometimes **participles**) do not actually *act* as verbs in a sentence.
- When you identify the verb in a clause, include all of its **auxiliary verbs** (helping verbs). In the **progressive** and **perfect** tenses, the helping verb carries the tense because the main verb is always a **participle** (e.g., “is taking,” “had gone”).
- For more detailed information about verbs, see the [Verbs](#) section.

Subjects

Subject: The “thing” (sometimes abstract) that a sentence or clause is about

The **cat** ate the mouse.

The **mouse** was eaten.

The **mouse** was helpless.

- Subjects are always either **nouns** or **pronouns** (including words such as gerunds that act as nouns).
- Subjects usually precede the verb, but in some cases they follow the verb.
- The **simple subject** is the single noun or pronoun itself, independent of any modifiers that may be closely associated with it.

Clauses

With rare exceptions such as exclamations, every complete sentence in English contains at least one clause, and many sentences contain multiple clauses. If you can identify individual clauses and see how the clauses in a sentence relate to each other, you will be able to understand complex sentences and compose your own.

A **clause** is a meaningful group of words that contains a **subject** and **verb** pair.

*The **girl** in the back **decided** to speak up.*

In this clause, *the girl* is the subject (*girl* is the **simple subject**); *decided* is the verb. “In the back” is a prepositional phrase, and “to speak up” is an infinitive phrase.

- When you look for the **verb** in a clause, eliminate all **infinitives** and **infinitive phrases**. Infinitives never function as the verb in a clause. Underline infinitive phrases. In the clause above, “to speak up” is an infinitive phrase.
- When you look for the **subject** of a clause, eliminate all **prepositional phrases**. Subjects are almost never found within prepositional phrases. Prepositional phrases should also be underlined. In the clause above, “in the back” is a prepositional phrase; *with* is a preposition, and *back* is its object.
- Note that a clause can have a **compound subject** (more than one subject sharing the same verb) and a **compound predicate** (more than one verb sharing the same subject). The clause “**Jordan** and **Keegan** **drank** beer and **cracked** jokes” contains both a compound subject and a compound predicate.

Independent Clauses

An **independent clause** is a clause that can stand alone as a sentence because it expresses a complete thought. The example clause above is an independent clause.

- *Every complete sentence must contain at least one independent clause.*

- Place independent clauses in **braces** { }.

Dependent Clauses

A **dependent clause** (or **subordinate clause**) is a clause that cannot stand alone as a sentence because it does not express a complete thought. It “depends” on an independent clause to help it form a complete sentence.

- Dependent clauses always begin with a particular word or expression that suggests that more information is necessary to form a complete thought.
- Many dependent clauses begin with a **subordinating conjunction** like *although*, *because*, *when*, *until*, *while*, *since*, etc. (See the list below.)
- In this notation system, dependent clauses are placed in **brackets** [].

Although the girl was not a member of the student council...

In the clause above, *girl* is the subject, *was* is the verb (a “to be” verb), and *although* is the subordinating conjunction that makes us expect another clause.

because she believed...

In the clause above, *she* is the subject, *believed* is the verb, and *because* is the subordinating conjunction that makes us expect another clause.

Common Subordinating Conjunctions		
after	even though	until
although	how	when
as	if	whenever
as if	in case	where
assuming that	in order that	wherever
as though	once	while
because	provided that	why
before	since	
even if	unless	

Note that some of the conjunctions listed above can also function as prepositions and/or adverbs.

Other dependent clauses begin with a pronoun such as *that*, *which*, *who*, or *whom*. These words don’t always indicate a new clause, but they often do. Such clauses are called **relative clauses**.

that the students’ rights had been violated

That is the pronoun that introduces this relative clause; *rights* is the simple subject (*the* and *students'* are modifiers), and *had been violated* is the complete verb (*had* and *been* are helping verbs).

who came forward to argue against the school's policy

Who has two functions in this clause: it acts as the subject of the clause, and it indicates the beginning of a dependent clause. *Came* is the verb in this clause. *To argue* is an infinitive; "against the school's policy" is a prepositional phrase modifying that infinitive.

Note that if this clause were written as a separate sentence, it would be an independent clause and a question, but in the context of the full sentence below it is a relative clause.

Clauses in a Complex Sentence

Here is what the various clauses above look like when they are connected together as a complex sentence and marked according to this notation system:

[Although the girl [who came forward to argue against the school's policy] was not a member of the student council], {she decided to speak up} [because she believed [that the students' rights had been violated]].

In this sentence, double brackets occur at the end of the sentence because the relative clause "that the students' rights had been violated" is enclosed within the dependent clause "because she believed"; the entire clause is the object of the verb *believed*. (What did she believe? *That the students' rights had been violated*.)

The relative clause "who came forward to argue against the school's policy" is similarly enclosed within the first dependent clause because it modifies the subject of that clause (*girl*).

The only independent clause is the short clause in the middle ("she decided to speak up"); it is only the presence of this clause that makes this a complete sentence.