

## An Introduction to Sentence Analysis

“Sentence analysis” is the name 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:

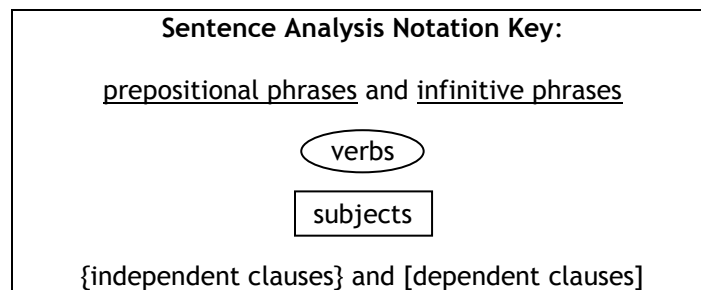
1. **identifying its most important elements** (and trimming the sentence down to its essence)
2. **understanding how the sentence is constructed** (its parts and how they fit together)
3. **recognizing errors** in subject-verb agreement, pronoun case, punctuation, etc.

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

1. **infinitive phrases** and **prepositional phrases** (the most common extraneous elements)
2. **verbs**
3. **subjects**
4. **clauses** (independent and dependent)

I call infinitive phrases and prepositional 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 the order in which they are listed above will help you avoid mistakes.



**Subject:** the “thing” that a sentence (or clause) is about

- Subjects are always either **nouns** or **pronouns**<sup>1</sup>.
- 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.
- In my notation system, subjects are **boxed**.

**Verb:** the action done by or to the subject

- **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 participles do not actually *act* as verbs in a sentence.
- In my notation system, verbs are **circled**.

<sup>1</sup> or words such as gerunds that act as nouns

## Clauses

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

*The girl with the mohawk decided to speak up.*

In this clause, *the girl* is the subject (*girl* is the **simple subject**); *decided* is the verb.

- When you look for the **verb** in a clause, eliminate all **infinitives** and **infinitive phrases**. Infinitives never function as the verb in a clause. In my notation system, you should underline them.
  - Infinitives always take the same form: “to” followed by a base verb form: *to run*, *to work*, etc. When they are followed by an object (a noun or pronoun “receiving” the action of the infinitive), they form **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 never found within prepositional phrases. Prepositional phrases should also be underlined.
  - Under normal circumstances, prepositions are always followed by an object (a noun or pronoun to which the preposition relates), though there may be modifiers such as adjectives or articles between a preposition and its object. Taken together, they form a **prepositional phrase**.
  - In the clause above, *with the mohawk* is a prepositional phrase; *with* is the preposition, and *mohawk* is its object.
  - See my “Prepositions” *handout for a detailed discussion of prepositions, including a list of common prepositions*.

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

- *Every complete sentence must contain at least one independent clause.*
- In my notation system, independent clauses are placed in {braces}.

III. 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.

*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...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	

- 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.

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

- In my notation system, dependent clauses are placed in [brackets].

Here is what the various clauses above look like when they are connected together as a complex sentence and marked according to my 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*. The relative clause "who came forward to argue against the school's policy" is similarly enclosed within the first dependent clause.

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.

## Sentence Analysis Exercise 1

*Here are some simple sentences to help you practice this kind of sentence analysis:*

1. As I turned to him and told him the news, he shook my hand excitedly and congratulated me.
2. With a loud sigh and a hearty belch, the stuffed and exhausted man lay down in his creaky bed.
3. Skeeter tried to antagonize Jimbob by mocking his dental hygiene, but Jimbob brushed off his insult with a toothless grin.
4. Because the cat was meowing incessantly, I stopped to have a conversation with it.
5. Although I didn't like the awful paintings that he showed me, I politely and cruelly encouraged him to keep practicing.
6. As a junior in high school, I read many novels and short stories by American writers whose work I only later learned to truly appreciate.
7. In a wide-eyed trance, the captivated audience gave the fascinating speaker their full attention.
8. David Robinson and Tim Duncan, who were known as the "Twin Towers," were the most feared NBA frontcourt in the late 90's and early 2000's.
9. Like a slightly crazy angel, she was smiling when she told me that all of her belongings had been destroyed in the fire.
10. The house that burned down was built in 1865, and it was considered both an eyesore and a landmark.

## Answers to Sentence Analysis Exercise 1

1. [As I turned to him and told him the news,] he shook my hand excitedly and congratulated me.]
2. {With a loud sigh and a hearty belch, the stuffed and exhausted man lay down in his creaky bed.}
3. {Skeeter tried to antagonize Jimbob by mocking his dental hygiene,} but {Jimbob brushed off his insult with a toothless grin.}
4. [Because the cat was meowing incessantly,] I stopped to have a conversation with it.]
5. [Although I didn't like the awful paintings] [that he showed me,] I politely and cruelly encouraged him to keep practicing.]
6. {As a junior in high school, I read many novels and short stories by American writers} [whose work I only later learned to truly appreciate.]
7. {In a wide-eyed trance, the captivated audience gave the fascinating speaker their full attention.}
8. {David Robinson and Tim Duncan, who were known as the "Twin Towers,"} were the most feared NBA frontcourt in the late 90's and early 2000's.}
9. {Like a slightly crazy angel, she was smiling} [when she told me [that all of her belongings had been destroyed in the fire.]]
10. {The house [that burned down] was built in 1865,} and {it was considered} both an eyesore and a landmark.}

### Some explanatory notes:

1. Both clauses in this sentence have compound predicates (two verbs with the same subject).
2. "Sigh" and "belch" form a compound prepositional object; "stuffed" and "exhausted" are verb forms (participles) acting as adjectives, not as verbs; "to lie down" is a phrasal verb.
3. "Mocking" is a gerund (a present participle acting as a noun); "to brush off" is a phrasal verb; "but" can be considered part of the second clause but essentially is a conjunction joining the two clauses.
4. It is, in fact, acceptable to start a sentence with "because" as long as it is a complete sentence.
5. The relative clause "that he showed me" modifies the noun "paintings"; as a gerund acting as the object of the infinitive "to keep," "practicing" is part of that infinitive phrase.
6. The relative clause at the end of the sentence modifies the noun "writers."
7. "Captivated" and "fascinating" are participles acting as adjectives, not verbs.
8. The relative clause "who were known as the 'Twin Towers'" modifies the compound subject "David Robinson and Tim Duncan"; "feared" is a participle acting as an adjective.
9. Because the last clause of this sentence is the direct object of the verb "told," it is included within the brackets for the "when..." clause. Note also that "like" is a preposition when used in this sense and that "all," not "belongings," is the subject of the last clause.
10. Although the sentence is saying that the house burned down, from a grammatical point of view, the pronoun "that" (which refers to "house") is the subject of the verb "burned down"; "house" is the subject of the verb "was built."