

UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR ANALYSIS LEVEL, LABEL, AND FUNCTION

"Grammar," which comes from Latin, means the scientific study of the form and arrangement of words, phrases, and sentences. Every language has a grammar (even if that language is not written); every language has its own patterns. Just as biologists can label parts of plants and can sort animals into groups, grammarians can label parts of speech and can sort sentences into patterns.

In order to understand grammatical analysis, the student must learn a certain amount of terminology. Confusion arises when these terms are not accurately understood. Actually, there are three basic things going on during English grammar analysis. As a student, one must keep these three straight: level, label, and function.

LEVEL

Language is made of sounds, words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, and even more complex pieces (such as essays, chapters, and books). Each of these levels can be analyzed.

SOUNDS

Letters represent sounds. The English alphabet includes only five vowels (a, e, i, o, u), but the English language has at least twelve vowel sounds. Consonants (the other letters) also represent sounds. Linguists (language analyzers) can break these sounds into even smaller pieces.

Examples of sounds: m, n, t, ou, z

WORDS

When sounds are combined, words are created. Words can be labeled according to their function in a phrase, clause, or sentence. Once its function is determined, a word can be labeled.

Examples of words: students, light, run, be, the

PHRASES

Phrases do not contain subjects and verbs. A phrase is incomplete in thought. Phrases (and parts of phrases) can be labeled, as well.

Examples of phrases:	writing a letter	broken by the fall
	through the door	around the corner
	to proofread a paper	in a minute

CLAUSES

Clauses contain subjects and verbs. There are two kinds of clauses: independent and dependent. Independent clauses can stand alone and can be called a "sentence." Dependent clauses cannot stand alone, are not sentences, and can be labeled according to their function in sentences.

Examples of independent clauses: I'm tired.
The car is running.

Examples of dependent clauses: because I'm tired
which is my excuse

SENTENCES

Sentences have two essential parts: complete subject and predicate. They have various patterns. In English there are five forms of sentences:

simple: one independent clause--
The children are playing outdoors.

compound: two or more independent clauses--
The children are playing outdoors, and their parents are playing Scrabble indoors.

complex: one independent clause and one or more dependent clauses--
The children are playing outdoors while their parents are playing Scrabble indoors.

compound-complex: two or more independent clauses and one or more dependent clauses--
The children are playing outdoors because the weather is nice, but their parents are playing Scrabble indoors.

complex-complex: one or more independent clauses and at least one dependent clause which contains an imbedded dependent clause--
The children, who are playing outdoors because the weather is nice, are

happy.

Sentences can also be analyzed according to usage (declarative, interrogative, imperative, and exclamatory).

Examples of sentences: Rain is falling. (declarative)
Does Henry live here? (interrogative)
Open the window. (imperative)
What a noise you made! (exclamatory)

PARAGRAPHS

Paragraphs also have "grammar" even though they are bigger pieces than sentences. Paragraphs are made up of related sentences and are about one topic only. Paragraphs have a topic sentence; all the other sentences relate to it.

Example of a paragraph (topic sentences is underlined): My father loves to fish. Every October he goes to Canada along with several fishing buddies. It doesn't really matter if he catches anything or not. The whole point is relaxation and companionship with good friends. Of course, he usually catches enough bluegill to have at least one fish fry with the family when he gets back. My dad would not miss his annual fishing trip for all the fancy vacations in the world.

Beyond the paragraph there are even more complex levels: essay, chapter, book, and so on. With each of these larger levels, patterns exist. Relationships between pieces can be analyzed.

Each level can be either built up to create a higher lever (for example, word to phrase to clause to sentence) or broken down to a lower level (for example, sentence to clause to phrase to word).

LABEL

Labels are given to the various levels according to their functions in context. As far as grammatical labeling, we will be concerned with three levels only: word, phrase, and clause. The terms we will use are commonly known as "parts of speech."

NOUNS

"Noun" means name. This label is given to the name of a person, place, thing, idea, or belief. Nouns are often preceded by "the" or "a/an." Nouns answer the questions "Who?" and "What?"

They can be found on three levels:

Word: The class went on a field trip to the zoo. (Who went? On a what? To the what?)

Phrase: She enjoys playing baseball. (Enjoys what?)

Clause: Whatever you want to do is fine with me. (What is fine?)

PRONOUNS

Pronouns take the place of nouns (which are called "antecedents" of pronouns). Therefore, pronouns also answer the questions "Who?" and "What?" As diverse as they are, English pronouns are actually a lot less complicated than they used to be, now that words like *thou*, *thee*, *thy*, and *thine* are not commonly used. Pronouns are word level pieces even though they can be found in phrases and clauses.

Pronouns can be labeled according to the following:

number (singular/plural): it/they

gender (male/female): he/she

case (subjective/objective/possessive/reflexive): he/him/his/himself

person (first/second/third): I/you/he, she, it

Also, pronouns can be divided into groups:

personal: I, you, he, she, it, they, we, etc.

indefinite: anybody, someone, each, everyone, etc.

interrogative: who? what? which? etc.

relative: that, which, who, whom, whose

demonstrative: this, that, these, those

ADJECTIVES

Adjectives describe nouns and pronouns. Adjectives answer the questions "What kind?" "How many?" "Whose?" "Which one?" They function as "modifiers" (change agents) in a sentence and can be labeled on all three levels. (Note: In English, word level adjectives generally appear before the noun/pronoun, and phrase or clause level adjectives appear after it.)

Word level: Tommy pulled the red wagon down the street. (What kind of wagon?)

Phrase level: A man with a beard came into the room. (Which man?)

Clause level: All students whose cars are illegally parked will be ticketed. (Which students?)

Articles (*the*, *a*, *an*) are a special group of adjectives. It is optional to label the articles when one is looking for adjectives.

VERBS

Verbs show physical or mental action of the subject. They may also reflect "state of being"; that is, the subject just "is." The complete verb, along with its complements and modifiers, functions as the predicate in a sentence. Verbs answer the questions "What is happening/has happened/will happen?"

Verbs are labeled primarily on the word level although many times verbs have compound parts (two-word verbs or helpers). Any word that functions as action in a sentence is labeled a verb. Verbs are the parts that show time change (tense).

Examples of verbs: Marge will go with you.
The baby has been crying for two hours.
The coach sat and pondered the situation.
It should have been done by now.

ADVERBS

Adverbs are modifiers (change agents) of verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs. They answer the questions: "Where?" "Why?" "When?" "How?" "How much?" or "To what extent/degree?" Adjectives can often be changed into adverbs if "-ly" is added to them. Adverbs can be found on all three levels.

Word level: I'm leaving later. (When am I leaving?)

Phrase level: Put the book on the table. (Where should you put it?)

Clause level: Because she felt sick. Betty went home. (Why did she go home?)

Adverbs can modify verbs: Bill felt asleep quickly. (How did he fall asleep?)

Adverbs also modify adjectives: Our cat has bright green eyes. (What degree of green?)

They modify other adverbs, as well: I cannot run very quickly. (How quickly?)

Note: Qualifiers such as very, often, always, not, and never are adverbs.

CONJUNCTIONS

Conjunctions are words that connect words, phrases, and clauses. There are three groups of conjunctions: coordinating, subordinating, and correlative. Although conjunctions are in themselves basically word level (correlatives are made up of more than one word), they can create phrases, clauses, and different patterns of sentences. Conjunctions may be small, yet they play a critical role in one's understanding of grammatical analysis.

Coordination: Bob and Sue went camping.
The squirrel ran up a tree, but I still got a picture of it.

Subordinating: While they were putting up the Christmas tree, the dog knocked it over.

Correlative: Neither the coach nor the players knew what had caused the loss.

PREPOSITIONS

In many ways, prepositions are what hold the English language together (and what give second language speakers fits!). Out of the 25 most frequently used words in English, nine of them are prepositions (*of* holds the number two spot behind *the*.)

Prepositions show relationships between words. This part of speech can be labeled on two levels: word and phrase. Prepositional phrase = preposition + modifiers + object.

Prepositional phrases function in a sentence as phrase level adjectives and adverbs. If a preposition has no object, it becomes an adverb. In fact, many English verbs are made up of a main verb + preposition-that-has-become-an-adverb (for example, look up; sit down; turn around).

Examples of prepositional phrases:

Between you and me, I'm not surprised.

Put your dirty socks in the laundry basket.

One of the children is late for the party.

Note: Objects of prepositions are nouns and pronouns, but these *never* function as the subject of a sentence. (See Function)

INTERJECTIONS

Interjections are words or short phrases that are used alone to express strong emotion. They are usually followed by an exclamation point.

Examples: Hey! Wow! Oh, Boy! Congratulations!

FUNCTION

Outside of its context, a word cannot be accurately labeled. Even a word as simple as *the* cannot always be labeled as an article. For example, "*The* is hard to pronounce for people learning English." In this sentence, *the* is functioning as the subject; it is doing a noun thing, so it will be labeled a noun in this sentence.

Also, consider the word "light":

Turn on the light. (noun)

I wish you wouldn't light your cigarette in here. (verb)

The cake was light and fluffy. (adjective)

His eyes were light blue. (adverb)

In other words, A WORD IS LABELED BECAUSE OF ITS FUNCTION, not the other way around. Failure to understand this principle is probably the primary cause of confusion for students of grammar.

Students usually know that the subject of a sentence must be a noun (or pronoun). However, they often fall into the trap of calling every noun in a sentence the "subject." This is an all too common error. This problem can be avoided if one understands functions within a sentence and realizes that labels are to be attached accordingly. A WORD CAN HAVE ONLY ONE LABEL AT A TIME!

Functions of a noun:

A word, phrase, or clause is labeled a noun if it functions as one of the following:

1. Subject: who or what the sentence is about; who or what is doing the action
Equality under the law is guaranteed for all. (What is guaranteed?)
2. Direct Object: who or what receives the action of the verb
I never saw what was coming. (Never saw what?)
3. Indirect Object: who or what follows an implied "to" or "for"
The teacher gave Bill an A in the course. (Gave to whom?)
4. Object of the Preposition: answers "Who?" or "What?" after the preposition
I hung a picture on the wall. (On the what?)
5. Object of a Verbal (Gerund, Participle, Infinitive): answers "Who?" or "What?" after the verbal
Playing tennis is a good exercise. (Playing what?)
6. Subject Complement: who or what follows a linking verb and means the same as the subject
Margaret was the mother of five. (Margaret was who?)
7. Appositive: renames another noun
Henry, my cousin, lives on my block. (renames Henry)
8. Direct Address: who or what is being talked to
I told you, Larry, that I'll be there when I get there! (talks to Larry)

Functions of a verb:

A word or group of words will be labeled a verb if it shows physical or mental action (or a state of being). Verbs answer the question "What is happening?" The verb, its modifiers, and its objects are called the "predicate" of a sentence.

1. Verbs that take a direct object are labeled "transitive."
Mother baked bread.
2. Verbs that are not followed by an object are called "intransitive."
The baby cried frequently.

NOTE: Both transitive and intransitive verbs are called "action" verbs.

3. Verbs can connect subjects to complements.
Mary looked tired after her test.

NOTE: This kind of verb is called a "linking" verb.

4. Verbs can be made up of more than one word: helpers and main.
You should have told me before now.
5. Verbs show time changes (tense).
Tommy runs quickly.
He ran out of steam.
He will run in the race again next week.
6. Verbs can show voice (active/passive).
Marie baked the pie.
The pie was baked by Marie.

**Nouns and verbs are like the mother and father of the grammar family. All the other parts are described in relation to these two basic parts.

The other parts of speech function in less complicated ways.

Functions of a pronoun: the same function as that of a noun

They are late. (subject)
The movie didn't make sense to me. (object of prep.)

Function of an adjective: modify nouns and pronouns; adjectives have a determined place in the sentence according to level (word level adjectives normally precede the noun, except for complements; phrase and clause levels follow the noun).

The show that I really like is on now.
Little children are adorable.

Function of an adverb: modify verbs, adjectives, and adverbs; these words, phrases, and clauses are generally much more movable than adjectives.

I did not take her seriously because she was always joking.
Because she was always joking, I did not take her seriously.

Function of a conjunction: connect words, phrases, and clauses; create dependent clauses

I wanted chocolate ice cream, but the store was out.

Not only did he hit me, but he also kicked me.

Even though Sam is a good guy, Renee doesn't like him.

Function of a preposition: word level function as adverbs; phrase level function as modifiers. Words can be labeled "prepositions," but prepositions never function in a sentence on a word level (see Label). Prepositions take objects. These objects NEVER function in a sentence as a subject.

Sit down and be quiet. (adverb)

Sue fell down the steps. (prepositional phrase)

Function of an interjection: word or phrase level expressions of emotion

Bravo! Yes! Good Grief!