

English sentence structure

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In English, sentences generally consists of **a subject** and **a predicate**.

- A subject is mostly a simple noun or noun phrase.
- A predicate tells us about what the subject does (action) or what/how the subject is like (quality or state). Sometimes a predicate contains modal or auxiliary verbs such as ‘should, could, would, might, may, must and etc.’

Let us take the following as instance.

1. a) John **runs every morning**.
b) He **is very healthy**.

In (1a), the noun “John” refers to a person whose name is John and it functions as a subject of the sentence while the bold part is a predicate that shows the action of what John does and how often he has that action. Similarly, in (1b) the predicate part “is very healthy” tells us what quality or state the subject has and ‘He’ is a pronoun which functions as a subject and tells us who is healthy.

Then, you might wonder what can be a subject. Fundamentally speaking, there are four things that can serve as the subject of the sentence; that is, *simple nouns*, *noun phrases*, *compound noun phrases* and finally, *noun clauses*.

2. A **simple noun** is usually just one single word that is a head noun.
 - a) John bought hamburgers.
 - b) He stole my bike last week.
 - c) This is what I came for.

In the sentences above, only a single word functions as a subject of the sentence; that is, John (proper noun), ‘He’ (a third person pronoun), and ‘This’ (a determiner noun),

3. A **noun phrase** is group of words that hang together. They have more than one word that is modified by adjectives or preposition phrases.
- a) The evidence suggests different conclusion.
 - b) The power plant generates electricity for the whole region.
 - c) The liquid became solid when the temperature was lowered.

In (3a, c), the subject of sentence comes from the combination between single nouns (evidence, liquid) and article (the). Moreover, nouns can combine with nouns to form a noun phrase (power + plant).

4. A **compound noun phrase** is a group of noun phrases which hang together and they are usually linked by connectors such as ‘and, but, not only ... but also, either ... or, either ... or’.
- a) Neither our family nor friends know that we are getting married.
 - b) Television and computers are dominating our lives.
 - c) Not only destruction and death but also generations of hatred between the two communities caused war.
5. A **noun clause** looks like a *wh*-question but it cannot stand on its own like *wh*-questions.
- a) What Alice said made her friends cry.
 - b) What Bill wrote surprised his family.
 - c) How that boy behaved was not polite.
 - d) Whether black holes exist or not needs scientific exploration.

In the examples (a-d), the underlined parts seem like *wh*-questions but they are not. Unlike questions, they could not stay by themselves to form a complete sentence since they are just noun clauses. To be a sentence, noun clause always requires a predicate part.

Types of English sentences

Sentence patterns in English can be structured and divided into three types as follows:

1. Subject + Verb (intransitive)

The predicate part is **intransitive verbs**. Intransitive verbs require only subjects to be a complete sentence. Therefore, objects are not necessary for the first type.

- a) The water evaporates.
- b) The beetles die.
- c) The cat lied in the shade under our car.
- d) Jack sneezed with violence around fresh ground pepper.
- e) We arrived at the classroom door with only 7 seconds to spare.

Note that intransitive verbs can be sometimes modified by prepositional phrases to giving more information about the actions or characteristics of the subject. For example, in (c) the prepositional phrase ‘in the shade under our car’ tells us more detail of where the cat lied.

2. Subject + Verb (transitive) + Object

The important feature of this type is that predicate parts obligatorily contain **transitive verbs** and **objects**. In this case, verbs are always transitive verbs (underlined part) that require objects (italicized part).

- a) The study reveals *a regular pattern of changes in temperature*.
- b) We investigated *the environmental effects of nanoparticles*.
- c) We get *a huge number of advertisements* every day.
- d) Lee proved *that the data were reliable*.
- e) The data showed *that the age of the subjects was not the main factor*.

Most Thai students usually form English sentences based on knowledge of Thai grammar. Therefore, note that if you write a sentence containing a transitive verb without object there, the sentence is grammatically wrong.

3. Subject + Verb (verb to be / linking verb) + Complement

In the last structure, verbs are either **verbs-to-be** or **linking verbs** and **complements** function as modification of the subject telling us about the characteristics, state, and quality of the subject. Linking verbs (e.g. seem, sound, feel, appear, look, smell) are ones that link between subject and its characteristics, state, and quality like verbs-to-be which is called **subject complement** (underlined part). Without subject complement, sentences are grammatically incorrect.

- a) Nanotechnology **is** a new discipline.
- b) Political theory **is** a popular undergraduate subject.
- c) The issue of globalization **is** a lively debate in seminar yesterday.
- d) The study **is** a really good example of the way sociologists collect the data.
- e) Robots and Artificial Intelligence (AI) **become** more effective.