

Introduction to Sentence Structure

Syntax means sentence construction

Or

The rules of constructing a sentence.

The way in which a sentence is written should demonstrate a knowledge of English grammar as well as the subject matter. A case cannot be argued well if sentences are not constructed in grammatical form.

The English knowledge you need covers verbs – forms of verbs, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, punctuation and spelling.

Most people have no difficulty in constructing a simple sentence where the subject, verb and object is clearly demonstrable e.g.

The tutor	marked	an essay.
subject	verb	objective

When there is a need to describe a person, or an object the positioning of **the adjective** is clear cut:

The **young** tutor marked a **long** essay.

Equally, when there is a need to describe how something was done, the positioning of the adverb is usually written in the way in which we speak:

The tutor marked an essay **quickly**.

OR

The tutor quickly marked an essay.

N.B.

The second sentence implies a different meaning – it appears that the tutor did something quickly before he/ she went on to do something else.

So the positioning of words within sentences must be PRECISE, even when using simple sentences.

Complex Sentences

Writing reports and essays demands a more complex form of sentences. It is in this context that tutors may allude to 'poor grammar' the use of 'split infinitives', or comment 'this is not a sentence'.

A complex sentence is made up of **clauses**.

All clauses have a subject and a main verb, but do not necessarily make a complete and independent sentence.

EXAMPLES

1. The man was frightened. (A simple sentence)

2. The man was frightened: the dog looked vicious. (A double sentence consisting of two simple sentences).
3. The man was frightened, because the dog looked vicious. (A complex sentence: it has a main clause – ‘The man was frightened’, and a subordinate clause – ‘because the dog looked vicious’).

Analysis of Sentence 3

The main clause is 'The man was frightened'.

This could stand on its own (and would then become a simple sentence).

The subordinate clause is 'because the dog looked vicious.' It cannot stand on its own because it leaves the reader hanging - as if something else needs to be said:

'Because the dog looked vicious...'

or

'...because the dog looked vicious'

The main verb of the main clause is 'frightened' and the subject of the main clause is 'The man'.

Further examples of complex sentences:

- i) Although I understand you've not been well, this work is inadequate.
- ii) This work is inadequate, although I understand you've not been well.

Analysis of Examples (i) and (ii)

The main thrust of these sentences is that the work is inadequate; the remainder of each sentence is a subordinate clause. Therefore, the main subject is 'this work' and the main verb is 'is'. When checking your work identify the main subjects and verbs and ensure that the verb tense is consistent, i.e. use the past (e.g. was, were) or the present (e.g. is, are) throughout your essay or report.

Note: the sentences (i) and (ii) are both grammatically correct, but note the shades of meaning. THE POSITIONING of phrases (clauses) is as important as the positioning of adjectives and adverbs.

(As a student which sentence would you prefer to hear?)

Complex sentences - word order

The placing of individual words can also alter meanings.

EXAMPLE

1. Mark ONLY wanted to see Ginny.
(This means Mark merely wants to see Ginny)

2. Mark wanted **ONLY** to see Ginny.
(This means that Mark had just one thing on his mind - to see Ginny)
3. Mark wanted to see **only** Ginny [Mark wanted to see Ginny alone –
presumably someone else was present OR Mark wanted to see Ginny AND NO
ONE ELSE - perhaps he single-mindedly went in search of her. Both versions are forceful.]

EXAMPLE

4. **EVEN** Bert offered money.
 5. Bert **EVEN** offered money.
 6. Bert offered **EVEN** money.
- There are clearly three different scenarios related to these sentences.

Finally, when proof reading your work read it aloud, or get someone else to read it to you, to make sure that you have expressed your thoughts accurately.

Checking verb forms

Verbs are usually spelt differently in singular and plural forms. The form selected must 'match' the **main subject**:

i.e. if the main subject is plural the main verb should be in plural form; if the main subject is singular the main verb should be in singular form.

EXAMPLES

The **students** **were given** an assignment on prisons.
subject verb

The **student** **was given** an assignment on prisons.
subject verb

This is a simple exercise in proof reading. Problems can arise where there is some confusion over the main subject.

EXAMPLE - using the verb 'to be'

a) The thoughts of Chairman Mao **is/are** encapsulated in the Little Red Book.

Analysis of a)

The main subject is 'The thoughts' so the form of the verb 'to be' should be in 3rd person (they) **plural**.

Therefore a) should use '**are** encapsulated'.... see below for the table of the verb 'to be' in the present tense:

	SINGULAR	PLURAL
1st person	I am	We are
2nd person	You are	You are
3rd person	She, He, It is	They are

Common errors relate to the incorrect form of the verb, particularly when a student writes as he/she speaks, e.g. 'She was sat there....' should be written as 'She was **sitting** there' - see the table below:

Verb 'to sit' past continuous tense.	SINGULAR	PLURAL
	I was sitting	We were sitting
	You were sitting	You were sitting
	He, She, It was sitting	They were sitting

There is no form of the verb 'to sit' which positions was/were with sat/sit.

Problems can also arise when the main subject is a group noun e.g. The family: 'the family' is made up of more than one person, the family is ONE family. The verb which follows it should be, therefore, 3rd person **singular** e.g. "The family **was sitting** in the dining room'.