

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 for example:

The tutor (is the subject) marked (is the verb) an essay (is the 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 or she went on to do something else.

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:

A simple sentence: The man was frightened.

A double sentence consisting of two simple sentences: The man was frightened: the dog looked vicious.

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A complex sentence: it has a main clause: 'The man was frightened', and a subordinate clause: 'because the dog looked vicious': The man was frightened, 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) above:

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.

Word Order for Complex Sentences:

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.)

Mark wanted only to see Ginny. (This means that Mark had just one thing on his mind, that is to see Ginny.)

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.)

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Example 2:

Even Bert offered money.

Bert even offered money.

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.

"students" is the subject and "were given" is the verb.

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

"student" is the subject and "was given" is the verb.

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

Using the verb 'to be':

a) The thoughts of Chairman Mao is or 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 verb 'to be' in the present tense:

1st person: I **am** (singular), We are (plural).

2nd person: You **are** (singular), You are (plural).

3rd person: She, He, It **is** (singular), They are (plural).

Using the verb 'to sit':

Common errors relate to the incorrect form of the verb, particularly when a student writes as he or she speaks, e.g. 'She was sat there...' should be written as 'She was

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sitting there'.

Verb 'to sit' past continuous tense:

I was sitting (singular), We were sitting (plural).

You were sitting (singular), You were sitting (plural).

He, She, It was sitting (singular), They were sitting (plural).

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