TERMS TO KNOW: Vital Sentence Elements

SENTENCE: A group of words that names at least one person or thing and expresses a complete thought about it. (The same definition applies to independent and main clauses.)

Ex: The mouse ran up the clock.

SUBJECT: The part of a sentence that names what the sentence is about. The complete subject includes a noun or pronoun plus the words that describe it. The simple subject is the unadulterated noun or pronoun.

Ex: The little gray mouse ran up the clock.

Some sentences have compound subjects, which contain two or more simple subjects:

Ex: The little gray mouse and its cousin ran up the clock together.

PREDICATE: The part of a sentence that tells what the subject does, or what it is, or what happens to it. At the very least, the predicate must contain a verb, and it usually includes additional words to complete the thought of the sentence (the complement). A compound predicate contains more than one verb.

Ex: The little gray mouse ran up the clock and jumped down onto the piano.

VERB: An essential part of every sentence – the word that tells what the subject does, what it is, or what happens to it. The verb is the word in the predicate that changes to indicate what tense (time frame) it is expressing.

Ex: All the little gray mice run in a pack. (present tense verb)
Yesterday, one of the mice ran up the clock in record time. (past tense)

Auxiliary (helping) verbs: Usually some form of BE, DO, or HAVE that combines with the base form of another verb to help it express what happens to the subject.
Ex: One little mouse has run out of steam. *(has = auxiliary verb)*

**TERMS TO KNOW: Clauses and Sentence Types**

**INDEPENDENT CLAUSE (sometimes called MAIN CLAUSE):** group of words that consists of a **subject** and **predicate** (including a **verb** and makes a complete statement. Every **sentence** must contain at least one independent clause, and an independent clause can stand alone as a sentence.

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verb

Ex: The cow jumped over the moon.

subject   predicate
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**DEPENDENT CLAUSE (sometimes called SUBORDINATE CLAUSE):** group of words that contains a **subject** and a **verb**, but does not make a complete statement -- so it’s *not* a sentence.

Some dependent clauses start with **relative pronouns** *(who, whom, whose, which, that)*. These are called **relative clauses**, and they act as adjectives, modifying the noun or pronoun that comes before them.

Ex: Old McDonald’s cow, which must have been on steroids, jumped over the moon.

Other dependent clauses start with **subordinate conjunctions** *(such as after, although, because, before, if, since, when, while and many others)*. Putting a subordinate conjunction at the beginning of the clause makes it sound incomplete; it depends on something else to complete its meaning.

Ex: Because she was looking for greener pastures, (dependent clause – not a complete thought)

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Because she was looking for greener pastures, the cow jumped over the moon.
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**NOTE:** Without the word “because,” the clause “she was looking for greener pastures” could stand alone as an independent clause; it would be a complete sentence. The addition of “because” or any other subordinate conjunction is what makes the clause sound incomplete.

*A dependent clause that is not attached to an independent clause is just a partial sentence; it is one type of sentence fragment.*

**COMPOUND SENTENCE:** Has two or more **independent clauses** joined by a **semicolon** or by a **comma** plus coordinating conjunction *(and, or, but, for, yet, so).*

Ex: The cow jumped over the moon; NASA decided to investigate.
Ex: The cow jumped over the moon, and NASA decided to investigate.

COMPLEX SENTENCE: One independent and one dependent clause.

\[\text{dependent clause} \quad \text{independent clause}\]

Ex: When the cow jumped over the moon, NASA decided to investigate.

Punctuation note: If the dependent clause comes first, put a comma between it and the independent clause. The comma is optional if the dependent clause comes after the independent clause.

COMPOUND-COMPLEX SENTENCE: Has two independent clauses (joined by a comma plus coordinating conjunction), at least one of which has a dependent clause attached to it.

\[\text{independent clause} \quad \text{independent clause}\]

Ex: Old McDonald had a farm, and on this farm he had a cow, which became quite famous when she jumped over the moon in search of greener pastures.

NOTE: Even though the dependent clause is the longest part of this sentence, it could not stand alone as a complete thought. If it were separated from the independent clause that precedes it, it would be a sentence fragment.

TERMS TO KNOW: Prepositional and Verbal Phrases

PHRASES are clusters of words that function as single units. Unlike clauses, they do not contain their own subjects and verbs. There are several types of phrases, but we will focus on prepositional phrases and verbal phrases.

A PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE consists of a preposition (those little words like at, by, for, in, of, on, to, with, etc.) plus a noun or pronoun (called the object of the preposition), possibly with descriptive words attached.

Ex: A fear of creepy crawly spiders tortures many people.

It is worth remembering that the object of a preposition can never be the subject of a sentence. If you are writing in the present tense, make sure that your verb agrees with its true subject, not with a word in a prepositional phrase that might follow that subject. In the example above, the subject of the sentence is the singular word “fear,” not the
plural object of the preposition, “spiders.” That’s why the verb, “tortures,” needs to end in an –s. (See handout on subject-verb agreement.)

VERBAL PHRASES consist of verbals plus the words attached to them. VERBALS are “fake” verbs. They look, sound, and smell like verbs, but they function as something else in the sentence (nouns, adjectives, or adverbs). Verbals come in three flavors: participles, gerunds, and infinitives.

PARTICIPLE: verb form that functions as an adjective (describes a noun).

*Present participles* always end in –ing.

Ex:  Little Miss Muffett sat on a tuffet, eating her curds and whey.

*Past participles* usually end in –ed or –en, but there are many irregular forms as well:

Ex:  Terrified by a spider, Miss Muffett ran for her life. The spider, left behind and shaken by the incident, took up residence on the tuffett.

NOTE that all of these past participles are formed out of verbs (“terrify,” “leave,” and “shake”), but they function in the sentence as adjectives, describing the nouns “Miss Muffett” and “spider.” The true verbs in the sentences are “ran” and “took.” Neither present nor past participles can serve as true verbs in a sentence, but they can combine with auxiliary verbs to form the true verbs:

auxiliary verb + present participle

Ex:  Miss Muffett *is* now seeing a therapist for her arachnophobia, and she *has vowed* to put the incident behind her.

One other point: A common mistake is to leave off the –ed ending on past participles. When you proofread, be sure to watch for those –ed endings:

NOT:  The spider, confuse by the reaction cause by its appearance, has also decide to mend its ways.

INSTEAD:  The spider, confused by the reaction caused by its appearance, has also decided to mend its ways.

GERUND: looks like a present participle (ends in –ing) but functions as a noun.

Ex:  *Being* a spider in a world of arachnophobes is a difficult life.
NOTE that the gerund phrase is the equivalent of “it” – a 3rd person singular subject; hence the choice of the verb “is.” (See handout on subject-verb agreement.)

**INFINITIVE:** the word “to” plus the base form of a verb:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Infinitive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ex: <strong>To start</strong> a support group for archnophobes, is Miss Muffet’s latest ambition.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE once again that we could substitute the word “it” for the infinitive phrase (“It” is Miss Muffett’s latest ambition), so we need to consider it a 3rd person singular subject.

Infinitive phrases can also serve the purpose of describing other words in their sentences:

| Ex: She no longer has the urge **to scream** or **to step on** every spider she sees. |

In summary, verbal phrases can be useful as almost anything in a sentence except as the true verb. A group of words that contains a verbal phrase instead of a true verb is another kind of **sentence fragment:** (See handout on sentence fragments)

| Ex. Leaving Miss Muffett and the spider to go on with their lives. |