

Sentence structure

Basic structure

The general rule in English is that a **simple declarative sentence** should be structured
Subjec – Verb – Object.

For example: *The lawyer drafted the contract.*

In this sentence, *the lawyer* is the subject, *drafted* is the verb, and *contract* is the object.

Subject

The subject is the part of the sentence that usually comes first and on which the rest of the sentence is predicated. It is typically – but not always – a noun phrase. In traditional grammar it is said to be the „doer" of the verbal action.

A subject is essential in English sentence structure – so much so that a dummy subject (usually „it") must sometimes be introduced (e.g. *It is raining*).

However, they are unnecessary in imperative sentences (e.g. *Listen!*), and in some informal contexts (e.g. *See you soon*).

Verb

Verbs are traditionally described as „doing" words. They are usually essential to clause structure. Verbs may be classified either as *main* or *auxiliary*.

Auxiliary verbs are traditionally described as „helping verbs", and include *be*, *do* and *have*. Compare: *I bought oranges. I have been buying oranges.*

Tenses / Past Tenses

One of the main difficulties experienced by non-native speakers in using tenses concerns which form of past tense to use in different situations.

Past-perfect tense

This tense refers to a past action which is completed before a more recent time in the past, and is formed using *had*. For example: *In 1998 I lived in New York. In 1997 I had decided to move to the United States the following year.*

Simple past

This tense refers to completed actions which occurred in the past, and is formed with the ending *-ed*. For example: *I lived in New York.*

Past continuous

This tense refers to an action which occurred in the past and is not described as having been completed. For example: *In 1998 I was living in New York.* A common mistake made by non-native speakers is to use the past continuous when the simple past or past-perfect tense should be used. In legal contexts this can easily lead to ambiguity. For example, to say „In 1998 I was working as a commercial lawyer" leaves it unclear as to whether you still work as a commercial lawyer.

Exercises

Read through the passage below and insert the correct past tense forms.

In 1989, Statchem _____ (open) its first chemical plant in Thailand. Two years before this the company _____ (begin) negotiations with Kemble Inc., but these eventually _____ (fall through). At about the same time, during the mid to late eighties, Statchem _____ (be involved in) in the development of plastics technology and _____ (spend) considerable sums of money on research and development. Statchem _____ (hope) that this investment would result in an increased market share going into the new decade. Unfortunately, this strategy failed _____ (to pay off). Due to the onset of a global recession, the market _____ (shrink) and as a result all the money and effort that Statchem _____ (put in) the project _____ (waste).

Object

The object is usually a noun phrase. In a simple declarative sentence it follows the verb. The object is usually said to be „affected" by the verb. Objects may be either *direct* or *indirect*.

In the sentence *I owe you nothing*, *you* is the direct object and *nothing* the indirect object.

Complex sentences

In more complex sentences, it may be necessary to introduce other parts of speech. These include:

Adjectives

An adjective is a word used to describe a noun or make its meaning clearer, e.g. *A green car. An efficient engine.* Adjectives go before the nouns they qualify. For example: *The **commercial** lawyer drafted the **sales** contract.*

Adverbs

Adverbs are words or phrases which add more information about place, time, manner or degree to an adjective, verb, other adverb or sentence (e.g. *greatly, very, fortunately, efficiently*). Therefore, adverbs may be added to modify the meaning of our example: *The commercial lawyer **efficiently** drafted the sales contract.*

Linking clauses

In order to build more complex sentences, it is necessary to find ways of linking clauses together. One way of achieving this is by using prepositions (*in, at, on, to, from* etc) or conjunctions (*and, or, but, since, when, because, although* etc). For example: *The commercial lawyer efficiently drafted the sales contract **for** the company, **but** the client requested various amendments **and** additions.*

Punctuation can be used to coordinate clauses in a sentence. For example: *The commercial lawyer efficiently drafted the sales contract, the receptionist faxed it to the client, and the client approved the draft.*

In addition, relative pronouns (e.g. *who, whom, whose, which, that*) provide a convenient means of linking sentences together. For example: *The commercial lawyer efficiently drafted the sales contract, **which** the client read and approved.*