

BASIC SENTENCE STRUCTURE

The **two basic parts** of any sentence are the **subject** and the **predicate**.

SUBJECT	PREDICATE
The subject is usually a noun — a word that names a person, place, or thing—or a noun phrase. Generally, the subject of a sentence tells who or what the sentence is about.* The subject is the noun or noun phrase that is doing something in the sentence.	The predicate is a verb —a word that expresses action, existence (a state of being), or an occurrence—or a verb phrase. The predicate usually follows the subject and tells what the subject does or what it is like.*

Simple sentences have one subject/verb pair. **Verbs must agree with their subjects** in number and person.

SUBJECT	PREDICATE
<u>Marie</u> s	<u>runs.</u> v
<u>We</u> s	<u>run.</u> v

Even though the subject may be more than one person or thing, and the predicate may contain more than one verb or action, a sentence will still be a simple sentence if it only has one subject/verb pair.

SUBJECT	PREDICATE
Marie and I	run and win.

Simple sentences may also contain an object. The **object** is part of the predicate. It is usually a noun that follows the verb and receives the action of the verb.

SUBJECT	PREDICATE
<u>Marie</u> s	<u>runs</u> <u>the race.</u> v o

This basic pattern is **who (or what) does what**.

SUBJECT	PREDICATE	
WHO (S)	DOES (V)	WHAT (O)
Marie	runs.	
Marie	runs	the race.

Simple sentences may also contain modifiers that describe the subject or predicate.

SUBJECT	PREDICATE
My sister Marie	runs the race quickly.

A subject/predicate pair that can stand on its own is an **independent clause**. A simple sentence consists of just one independent clause.



CLARITY: The most common pattern of word order in the English language is SUBJECT-VERB-OBJECT. When the main characters are the subjects of the verbs, this pattern is clear and easy for most readers to understand.

A strategy for building clear, simple sentences:

1. Identify the main characters in your sentence (who or what the sentence is about).
2. Make those characters the subject.
3. Build your sentence by putting the subject first, followed by a verb that expresses the action of the subject, followed by the object (if there is one).
4. Check to make sure your verb(s) agree with your subject(s) in number and person.

Use the space below to practice this strategy.

SUBJECT	PREDICATE	
WHO (S)	DOES (V)	WHAT (O)
Marie	runs.	
Marie	runs	the race.

Now you are ready to add modifiers and think about combining clauses to make your sentences more complex. However, to ensure that your sentences are clear, keep the core of your sentence in the form shown above.

You can also use this as a revision strategy and to check for clarity and correctness in your sentences.

- Have you been told that you have errors in sentence structure or that some of your sentences are confusing or unclear?
 - Try breaking a sentence that you are concerned about into its basic parts (subject and predicate). If you have more than one subject/verb pair in the sentence, do this for each pair.
 - This can help you see how you might reword, rebuild, or rearrange the sentence so that it is easier for a reader to understand.
 - If you do this with a longer sentence, you might find that you have more than one independent clause or both independent and dependent clauses. When this is the case, your ideas may be best expressed by using more than one sentence and/or building a complex sentence. For more information about complex sentences, please see our "Building Complex Sentences" handout.

**This handout is only an introduction to subjects and verbs, and you should know that a subject can take multiple forms. For more information, please consult a resource like Joseph Williams's Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace.*