Identifying Verbs and Subjects

Explanation

This handout will help you identify two of the most important parts of speech, verbs and subjects. Being able to identify verbs and subjects will allow you to create complete and clear sentences; it will also help you understand other grammatical concepts like fragments and run-together sentences.

Identifying Verbs

Verbs are easy to identify because they are words that indicate action or a state of being, words like: write, run, tell, have, be, look, feel. Verbs are the only part of speech that gets conjugated, that is, that changes tense in order to indicate a particular time frame. This chart contains examples of some of the more common verb tenses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present</th>
<th>Past</th>
<th>Future</th>
<th>Present Progressive</th>
<th>Present Perfect</th>
<th>Past Perfect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I learn</td>
<td>I learned</td>
<td>I will learn</td>
<td>I am learning</td>
<td>I have learned</td>
<td>I had learned</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For more a comprehensive description of verb tenses and guidelines for using them correctly, see the “Verb Tenses” handout.

Connections

See also the “Verb Tenses” handout.

Original sentence: Running a marathon is not fun.

New tense: Running a marathon will not be fun.

Original sentence: Hoping to build up her portfolio, the supermodel is going to Paris.

New tense: Hoping to build up her portfolio, the supermodel went to Paris.

Original sentence: To escape their stress, Liz and Ryan have been watching bad reality TV.

New tense: To escape their stress, Liz and Ryan will be watching bad reality TV.

Original sentence: The bicycle had been left in the rain.

New tense: The bicycle was left in the rain.
Identifying Subjects
The **subject** of a sentence performs the action(s) indicated by the main verb; that is, the subject is the *doer* of the action: the **diva was singing** (the diva is doing the action of “singing”), the **glass broke** (the glass is doing the action of “breaking”), the **audience started to applaud** (the audience is doing the action of “applauding”).

To identify the subject of the sentence, you can ask yourself “who or what is (verb)?”

In the following examples, the subjects have been underlined once and the verbs underlined twice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Subject</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Running a marathon <strong>is</strong> not fun.</td>
<td><strong>What</strong> is not fun? <strong>running</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The <strong>supermodel is going</strong> to Paris.</td>
<td><strong>Who</strong> is going to Paris? <strong>the supermodel</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Liz and Ryan</strong> have been <strong>watching</strong> bad reality TV.</td>
<td><strong>Who</strong> is watching TV? <strong>Liz and Ryan</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The <strong>bicycle had been</strong> left in the rain.</td>
<td><strong>What had been left in the rain?</strong> <strong>the bicycle</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As you might have noticed, words that end in **–ing** can are sometimes act like subjects:

- **Running a marathon is** not fun.

and sometimes they act as verbs:

- **Liz and Ryan are** watching bad reality TV.

As a general guideline, when an **–ing** word is preceded by a form of “be” (i.e. is, are, was, were), it is acting as a verb.
Exercises
Find the subjects and main verbs in the following sentences. Underline the subject(s) once and the main verb(s) twice.

For example: To cheer himself up, he watched old detective movies and ate ice cream.

1. After a long, rainy winter, the woman and her husband had become tired of their small apartment, so they decided to drive to a seedy part of town in search of excitement.

2. The couple had been cruising slowly down a side street, looking for some local nightlife, when they heard music coming from a small bar on the corner.

3. They had just left their car when some stray cats started fighting in a side alley.

4. When couple walked in and sat down at the bar, nobody bothered to look up.

5. At one end of the bar, a tired-looking woman was languidly smoking her cigarette and expertly blowing out smoke rings.

6. The bartender was wiping down the counter and softly whistling to himself.

7. Hunched over a table in the back corner, four men were enjoying a friendly game of cards.

8. A sad Billie Holiday tune had been playing softly from an old jukebox, but once the song was over, the room went silent.

9. Suddenly, a man in the back stood and threw his cards down on the table, cursing loudly.

10. When he began to reach into his pocket, the couple looked at each other anxiously and then hurriedly backed out the door.