

Royal Fireworks

Language Arts

by Michael Clay Thompson

The Grammar of Literature

First Edition

Michael Clay Thompson

Royal Fireworks Press
UNIONVILLE, NEW YORK

Introduction:

Grammar is an idea construction set.

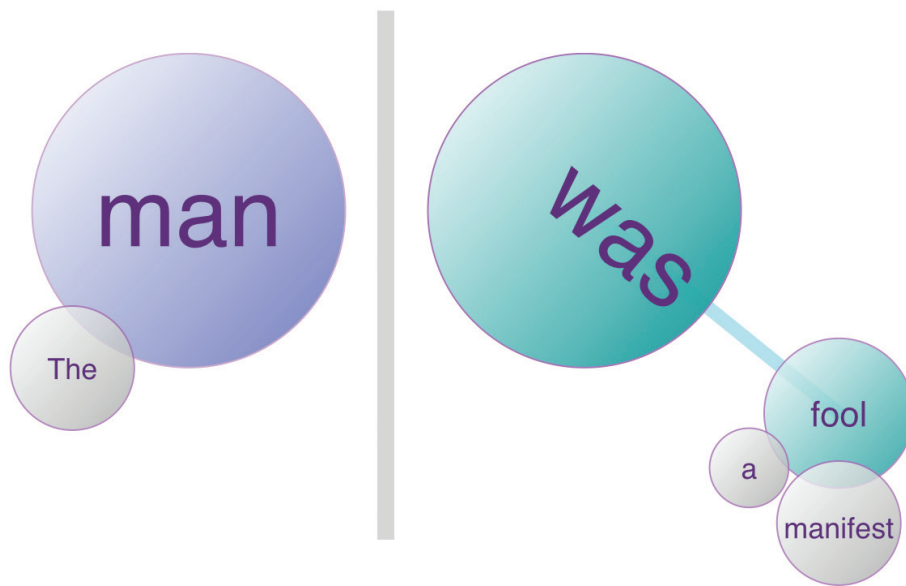
Once you understand grammar, the lights come on everywhere. All kinds of things start to make sense. Academic writing becomes fun. Punctuation becomes logical. It is so much better than not understanding.

You discover that grammar is an idea construction set, that grammar explains your mind, that grammar shows you the way you think things. You notice the grammar in your ideas, in your friends' words, in books that you read, and in papers that you write. You suddenly see grammar structures, patterns, and processes in everyone's sentences, including the sentences that great writers create. Great writers use adjectives to modify nouns, just as you do. They pair verbs with their subjects, just as you do. Despite the superficial changes that time brings to language, Charles Dickens and Jane Austen and F. Scott Fitzgerald used much the same grammar that we use today.

To find beautiful sentences—sentences that show our thinking process at its best—we need look no further than the sentences of great novelists. In their sentences we see the same parts of grammar that we use in our own sentences, but if we look closely, we also see that the parts of speech are used beautifully, efficiently, and with particular clarity. In the pages that follow, we will study sentences from great novelists, most of which will include a literary vocabulary word.

In this book I am not going to give elaborate explanations of every detail of grammar. If you would like that sort of extensive review, please consult either *Grammar Voyage* or *The Magic Lens I*. What I will do here is focus on the simplicity of grammar by providing brief overviews of the four levels of grammar—parts of speech, parts of sentence, phrases, and clauses—followed by several examples for you to analyze. I want this to be beautiful, clear, and simple, like grammar itself. Let us have a nice time looking at the grammar; we will begin with the parts of speech.

I will illustrate our sentences with my sentence model, the t-model. Note that I have done away with the misleading horizontal line in traditional diagramming to enhance the binary nature of sentences; sentences have two sides: a subject side and a predicate side that is about the subject.



From Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*:

| | | | | | | |
|-------------------|---|------------|------------|----------|-----------------|--------------|
| | The | man | was | a | manifest | fool. |
| Parts of Speech | adj. | n. | v. | adj. | adj. | n. |
| Parts of Sentence | subj. | | LVP | | S.C. | |
| Phrases | no phrases | | | | | |
| Clauses | -----independent clause----- a simple declarative sentence | | | | | |

This sentence from Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* illustrates how a linking verb can create an equation: man = fool. LVP means linking verb predicate. The adjective *manifest* means obvious, and it here modifies the noun *fool*. Note how powerful it is to put the noun *fool* at the end of the sentence; it would blunt the sentence to put more syllables after that strong word, such as if we were to say, "The man was a manifest fool, clearly." The power word, *fool*, goes at the end.

Level One: Parts of Speech

There are eight kinds of words. In an almost infinitely complicated universe, we say everything with only eight kinds of words. Even more amazing, there are only two main kinds of words: the noun and the verb. The other six kinds of words, with one exception (the interjection), work flexibly with the noun and the verb, modifying or connecting or showing relationships. In other words, in the face of the vast complexity of the universe, our language strategy is one of almost perfect simplicity. It is brilliant.

Nouns and verbs are the chambers of the heart of the sentence. A noun is a name of something such as a person, place, or thing. Nouns serve many purposes, but often the noun is the subject of the sentence. It is what the sentence is about, such as the noun *philosophy* in the sentence *Greek philosophy still influences our thinking today*. The verb is about the noun and shows action or linking or being.

Pronouns take the place of nouns, as when we say *she* instead of *Amelia*.

Adjectives modify nouns or pronouns: It was *a tedious* lecture. He is *blue*.

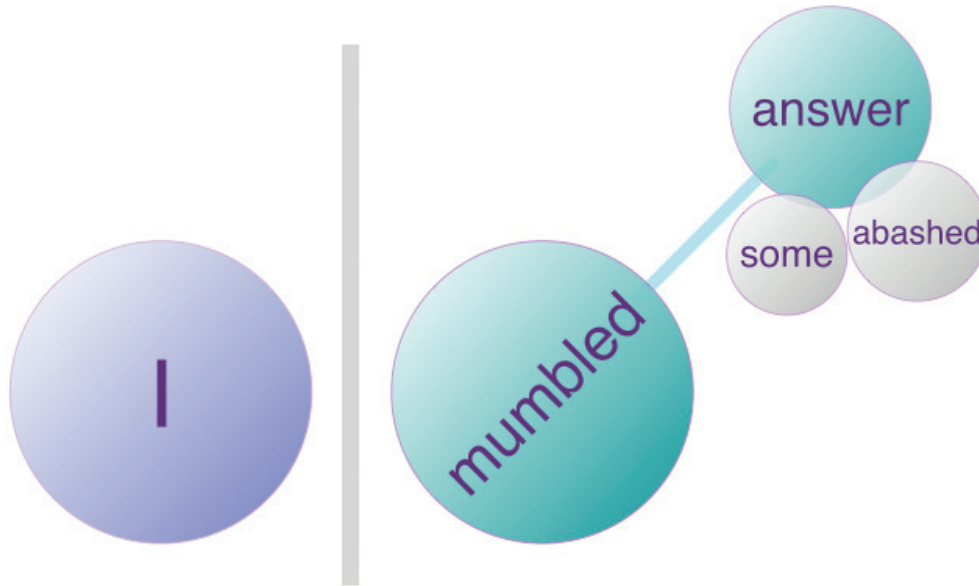
Adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs: They swam *quickly*.

Prepositions show a relationship between their object and another word in the sentence: *The boy **with** the red balloon laughed*. In that sentence, the preposition *with* shows a relationship between its object *balloon* and the noun *boy*. We will see later that prepositional phrases act like adjectives or adverbs.

Conjunctions join two words or two groups of words: Bob *and* Jane.

Interjections only show emotion; they do not have a grammatical function such as connecting or replacing: *Yes*, I will have chocolate cake.

To get the sense of these eight kinds of words, let us look at a few sentences, keeping in mind that all sentences have the same eight kinds of words.



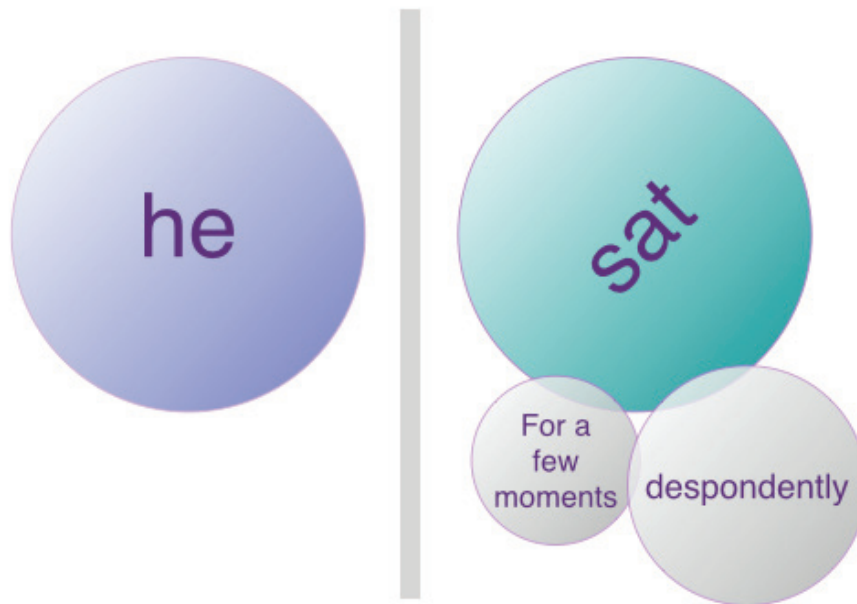
From John Knowles's *A Separate Peace*:

| | I | mumbled | some | abashed | answer. |
|-------------------|---|----------------|-------------|----------------|----------------|
| Parts of Speech | pron. | v. | adj. | adj. | n. |
| Parts of Sentence | subj. | AVP | | | D.O. |
| Phrases | no phrases | | | | |
| Clauses | -----independent clause----- a simple declarative sentence | | | | |

Here is a pleasant, clean sentence from John Knowles. We see two adjectives, *some* and *abashed*, both modifying the same noun, *answer*. The verb *mumbled* is an action verb, labeled AVP for action verb predicate. In this sentence the subject is a pronoun, not a noun. Notice that with an action verb, the verb in the t-model slants up.

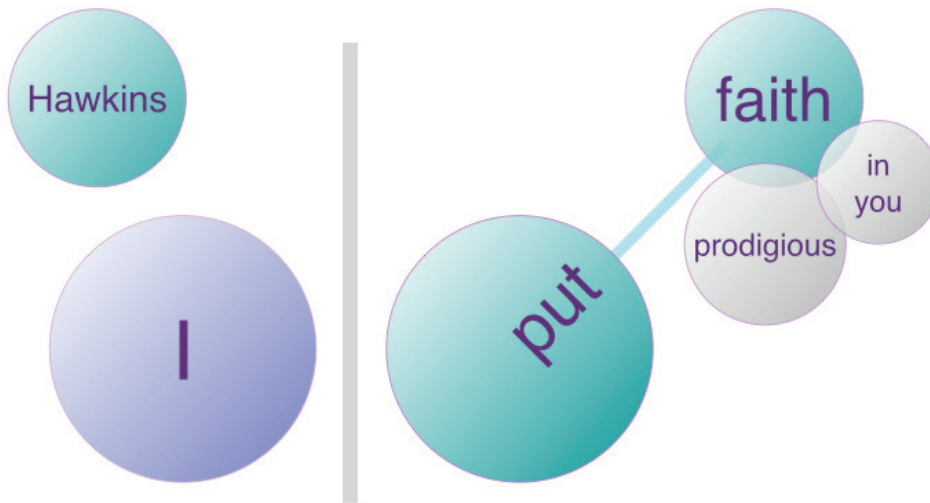
In *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, Mildred Taylor wrote, “The dust swelled up in rolls of billowing clouds behind us.” This sentence contains a strong adjective, *billowing*, that modifies the noun *clouds*. Notice that the adjective *billowing* is made out of an *-ing* verb form. We will examine more adjectives like that later.

In his great monster novel *Dracula*, Bram Stoker wrote, “For a few moments he sat despondently.”



Here we see a prepositional phrase, *For a few moments*, acting like an adverb to modify the verb *sat*, and we also see the adverb *despondently* modifying the verb *sat*. Here is an analysis of the parts of speech:

| | | | | | | |
|------------|----------|------------|----------------|-----------|------------|----------------------|
| For | a | few | moments | he | sat | despondently. |
| prep. | adj. | adj. | n. | pron. | v. | adv. |



From Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*:

| | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|-------------------------------|----------|------------|-------------------|--------------|----------------|-------------|
| | Hawkins, | I | put | prodigious | faith | in | you. |
| Parts of Speech | n. | pron. | v. | adj. | n. | prep. | pron. |
| Parts of Sentence | | subj. | AVP | | D.O. | | |
| Phrases | | | | | | -prep. phrase- | |
| Clauses | -----independent clause----- | | | | | | |
| | a simple declarative sentence | | | | | | |

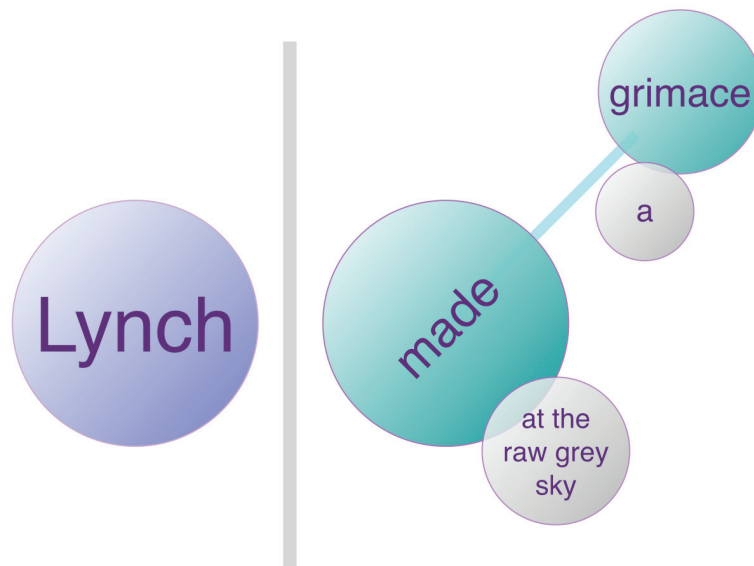
In this sentence from Robert Louis Stevenson, the proper noun *Hawkins* is what we call a noun of direct address, as when we say someone's name before speaking our sentence. The real subject of the sentence is the first person singular subject pronoun *I*.

Level Two: Parts of Sentence

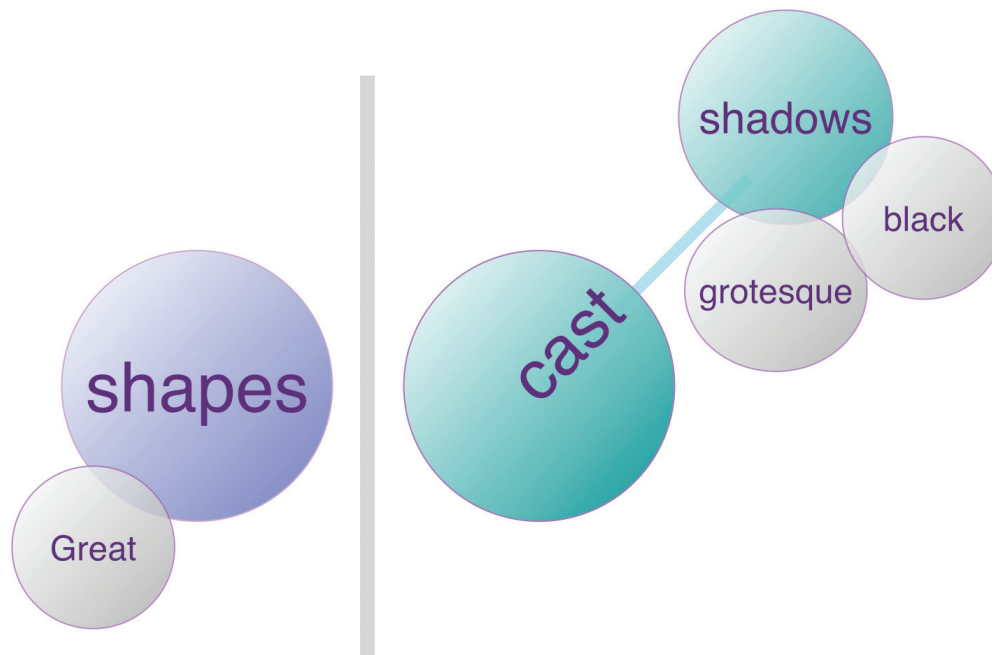
Let us move to the second level of grammar, the parts of sentence. This second level is even simpler than the first.

Sentence Structure: When we thought about the parts of speech, we were thinking about one word at a time. We looked at a sentence full of words and asked what each word was doing. Now we are going to look at how words form special structures to make ideas. It is a bit like bridge building: imagine a yard full of construction parts such as beams and bolts and nuts and so forth, but those parts could make various structures, including bridges. Sentences are like that. There are eight kinds of parts, but those parts can be combined in many different ways to make statements, questions, commands, and even exclamations.

You have already seen glimpses of standard sentence structures in the t-models on the previous pages. Now it is time to explain those t-models in more detail. The first thing to notice about sentence structure is that we think in binary terms. Ideas, in other words, have two pieces: a subject and a predicate. Either of these can be one word or more than one word. In this sentence by James Joyce, “Lynch made a grimace at the raw grey sky,” the subject is only one word, *Lynch*. The vertical line separates the subject on the left from the predicate on the right.



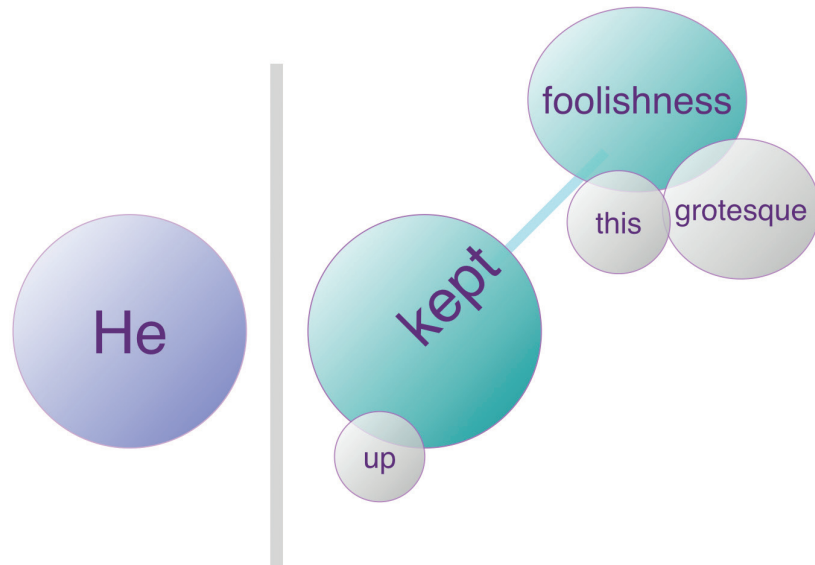
Even though the sentence is not about the verb, the sentence structure is based on the verb. Sometimes the verb is what we call a *being* verb, which means that it asserts that something exists. An example is: “Once upon a time, there was a hobbit.” The word *was* is a being verb; it means that a hobbit existed. Being verbs, however, are relatively rare. Most sentences use either *action* verbs or *linking* verbs, so those are the two kinds of verbs that we will emphasize. Action verbs sometimes transfer their action to a direct object, and linking verbs sometimes link their subjects to subject complements. That sounds complicated at first, but it is not. Let us look first at some action verb sentences. Here is a sentence from H.G. Wells’s novel *The Time Machine* (one of my favorite books). The actual sentence, or at least the beginning of it, is “Great shapes like big machines rose out of the dimness, and cast grotesque black shadows...” The essence of the structure is that shapes cast shadows. *Shapes* is the subject, *cast* is the action verb, and *shadows* is a direct object.



When the action verb transfers the action to a noun or pronoun so that the noun or pronoun gets verbed, that noun or pronoun is a *direct object*. It directly receives the action. The direct object cannot be the object of a preposition.

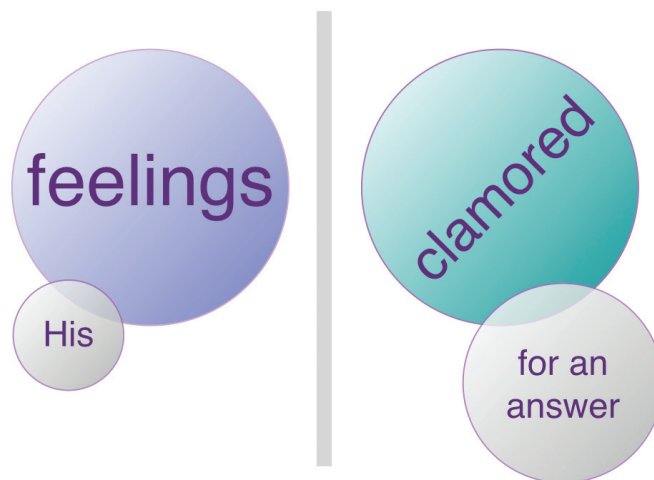
When the action verb transfers its energy to a direct object, we call it *transitive* (v.t.), and when it does not, we call it *intransitive* (v.i.).

Here is the same basic structure but in a sentence written by Mark Twain in *Tom Sawyer*. The sentence is “He kept up this grotesque foolishness.” This sentence uses the same structure: a subject, an action verb, and a direct object. The foolishness gets kept. This is a standard structure: subject, action verb predicate, and direct object: subj. - AVP - D.O.



In Twain’s sentence, *up* is an adverb, *this* is a demonstrative adjective, and *grotesque*—one of the greatest classic words—is an adjective.

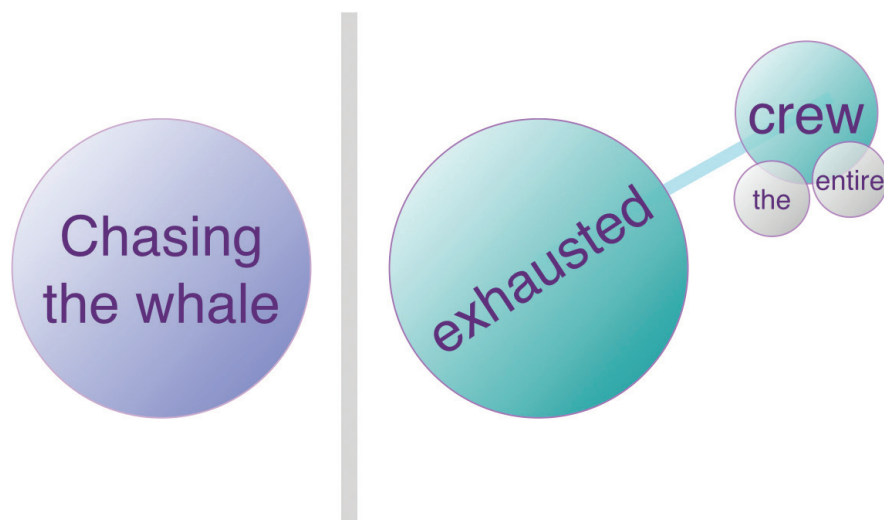
Here is an intransitive action verb sentence; it does not have a direct object. It has a prepositional phrase acting like an adverb. It is from Richard Wright’s *Native Son*: “His feelings clamored for an answer...” The action is not transferred.



Level Three: Phrases

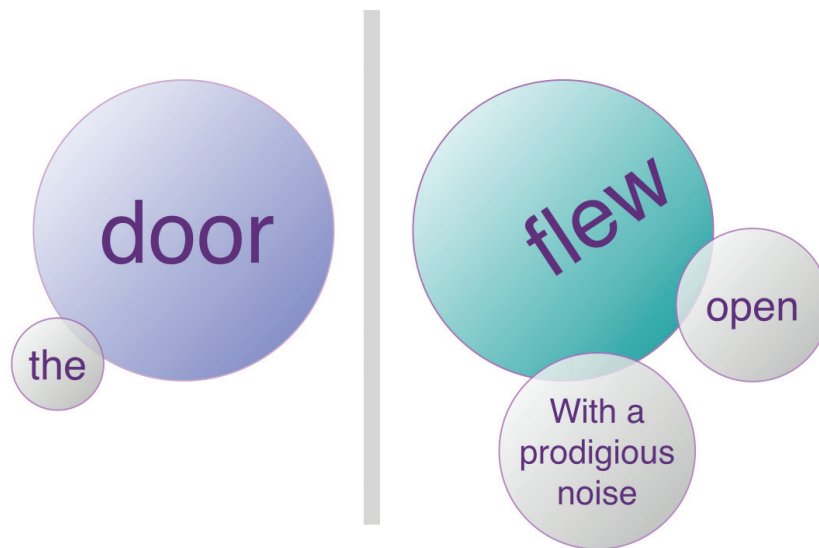
Let us now move on to the third level of grammar: phrases. People who do not understand grammar sometimes have the impression that phrases are difficult, but actually, there are only a few kinds of phrases, and each one can be defined in a single sentence. They can be strange at first, but they are not complicated.

Phrase: What is a phrase? A phrase is a kind of multi-word. It is a group of words that acts like one word. Imagine that the subject of a sentence was not one particular word but a group of words. Look at this sentence: “Chasing the whale exhausted the entire crew.” You see that the verb is *exhausted*, but what is the subject? *Whale*? No, it was not the whale that exhausted the crew, it was *chasing the whale* that exhausted them. The whole three-word phrase, *chasing the whale*, is the subject. We see three words playing the part of a noun/subject. This is interesting. It is as though the three words are glued together into a single noun: *chasingthewhale*. This group of words acts like one word. For this reason, we will put entire phrases into their own circles in our t-models, and that makes the secret simplicity of phrases beautifully visible:



There are only five kinds of phrases that we will discuss, though the word *phrase* is sometimes used in additional ways (*verb phrase*, for example). The five kinds are the prepositional phrase, the appositive phrase, and the three kinds of verbal phrase.

Prepositional phrases: Prepositional phrases are the first phrases we learn. Prepositional phrases begin with prepositions (in the *pre* position); in other words, the preposition is the first word of the phrase: *to the moon*. The preposition shows a relationship between its object and some other word in the sentence, so if the sentence is “The conclusion *of the novel* was sad,” then the preposition *of* shows the possessive relationship between its object *novel* and the noun *conclusion*. A prepositional phrase might have only two words, such as *for me* or *to Kansas*, but it can also have many words: *for a completely convincing response*. Taken as a whole, a prepositional phrase acts as a modifier; that is, it acts as an adjective or an adverb. Here is a sentence from Herman Melville’s great novel *Moby Dick* in which the prepositional phrase acts as an adverb to modify the verb: “With a prodigious noise the door flew open.”



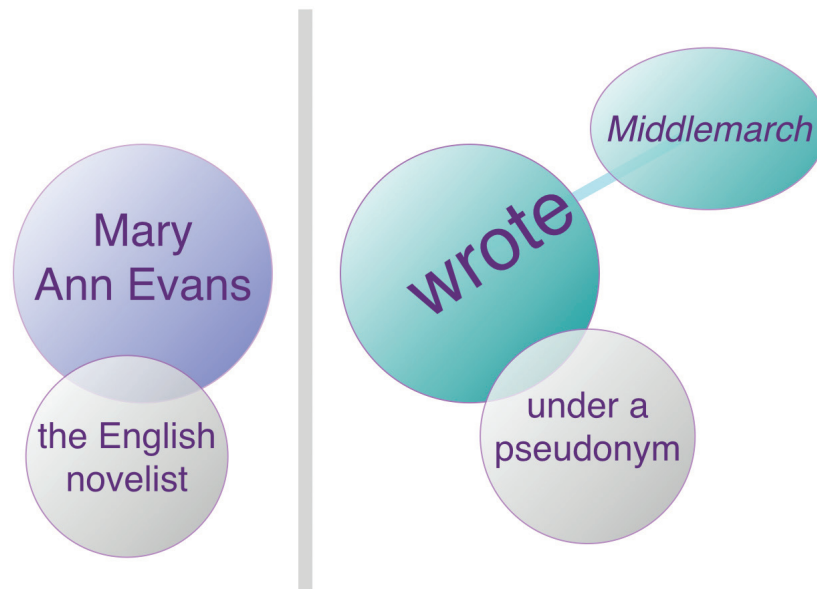
Notice that although the phrase modifies the verb, it comes at the beginning of the sentence. This is a common structure. Prepositional phrases that act as adjectives to modify nouns come right after the nouns they modify. In most cases it is easy to work out the meaning to determine what word the phrase modifies.

Appositive phrases: An appositive phrase is an interrupting definition enclosed in commas: “Linus Pauling, *the Nobel Prize recipient*, arrived late last night.” Appositives are called appositives because they are apposed—put beside—what they define. Appositive phrases give us an elegant and powerful way to clear away confusion by immediately identifying any person or term that might be unknown, rather than waiting until a later sentence to provide a definition. This efficient elegance makes appositive phrases the preferred choice for good style in writing. Here are some examples; please notice the commas:

Frances Crick, **the eminent biologist**, disagreed vociferously.
Punctuated equilibrium, **Gould’s theory**, was not unanimously accepted.
Assonance, **vowel repetition**, enriched the sound of the sentence.
Wellington, **New Zealand’s capital**, was their first destination.

Appositive phrases appear immediately after the nouns that they define, and they typically contain a noun and attendant words. The standard explanation of appositive phrases is that they act like nouns, simply renaming the noun they define. They also at times seem to act like adjectives, changing what one assumed about the noun they define, but this is not the main line of interpretation.

In the sentence “Mary Ann Evans, the English novelist, wrote *Middlemarch* under a pseudonym,” *the English novelist* is an appositive phrase that defines the brilliant novelist George Eliot, whose real name was Mary Ann Evans. She wrote *Silas Marner*, *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Daniel Deronda*, and other novels.



Verbal phrases: We have seen that a phrase is a group of words that acts like one word—like a wordclump. We have seen that phrases do not contain subject/predicate cores. We have seen that prepositional phrases act like modifiers (adjectives or adverbs), and we have seen that appositive phrases are interrupting definitions enclosed in commas. All that remains is the verbal phrases, and there are only three kinds, and each one can be defined in a single sentence.

Verbal phrases occur when we use a verb as something else; for example, we might use a verb as a noun. An example is *Thinking is fun*, in which the verb form *Thinking* is used as a noun—as a subject of the verb *is*. In that sentence there is no verb phrase, only the single verbal *Thinking*. In order to have a verbal phrase, then the verbal needs words that go with it: *Eating pizza is fun*. In that sentence the verbal phrase *Eating pizza* acts like a noun to serve as the subject of the sentence. *Eating pizza* behaves as though it were one word. The three kinds of verbal phrase are the gerund phrase, the participial phrase, and the infinitive phrase. Let us find out what gerunds, participles, and infinitives are.

Gerund: A gerund is an *-ing* verb form used as a noun. It can do anything that any other noun can do. It can be the subject, or direct object, or play any other noun role. Let us take the words *reading books* and use them as a gerund phrase:

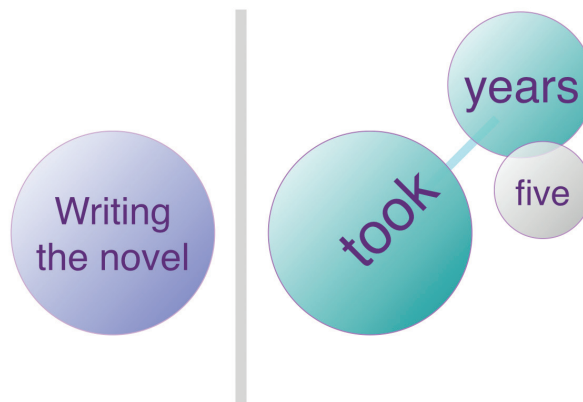
As a subject: *Reading books is fun.*

As a direct object: *I love reading books.*

As an indirect object: *He makes reading books a pleasure.*

As the object of a preposition: *There is great benefit to reading books.*

In all of these sentences, the gerund phrase is just a kind of two-word noun, doing the things that nouns do. In the following sentence, *Writing the novel* is a gerund phrase, and we call *novel* the *object of the gerund*.



Participle: A participle is a verb form used as an adjective. Unlike gerunds, which always end in *-ing*, participles can end in any verb ending, such as *-ing*, *-ed*, and *-en*. Participial phrases can occur many places in sentences, depending upon which nouns or pronouns they modify. Let us look at a few participial phrases, noticing the way they act like adjectives to modify nouns or pronouns:

Dickens, **writing rapidly**, finished the chapter in a week.

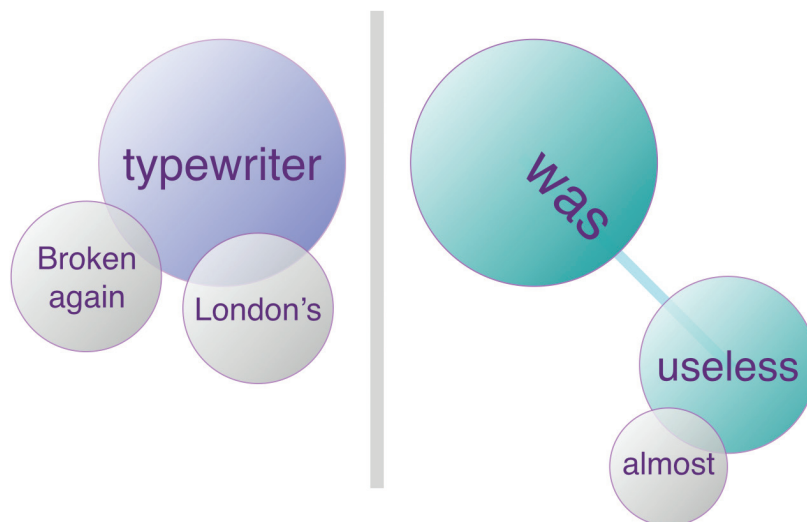
Writing rapidly, Dickens finished the chapter in a week.

Deeply cracked, the rock wall began to crumble.

We saw Austen, **badly disappointed**, leaving the building.

Fearing the worst, Jack London declined the invitation.

Broken again, London's typewriter was almost useless.



Introductory participial phrase: One important kind of participial phrase is the introductory participial phrase. It comes at the beginning of the sentence, modifies the subject, and is set off by a comma. There are four introductory participial phrases in the list above. It is crucial to understand these phrases because they add great energy to a sentence, but if they are not constructed according to the rules, they become disastrous misplaced modifiers:

Bad: Devouring the chipmunk, James saw the fox.

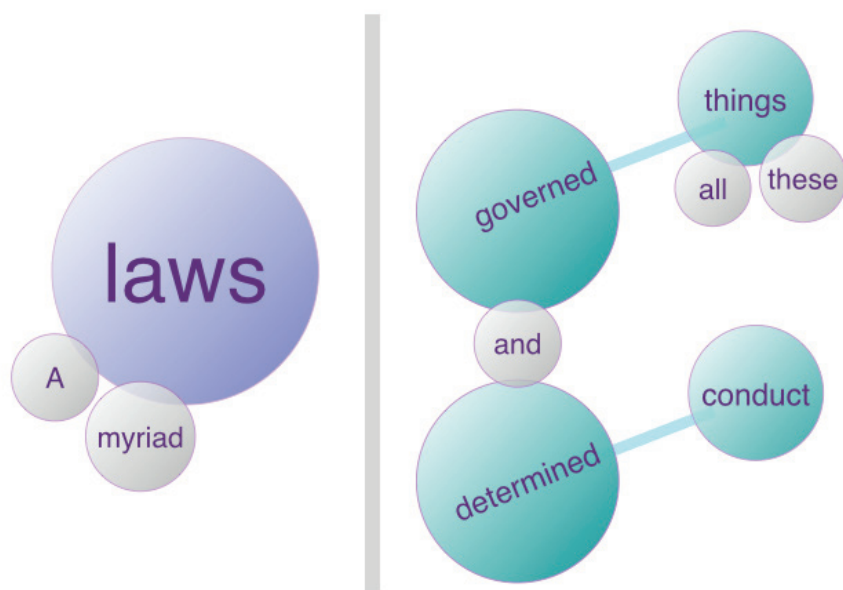
Good: Devouring the chipmunk, the fox stared at James.

In the phrase *Devouring the chipmunk*, the word *chipmunk* is the object of the participle.

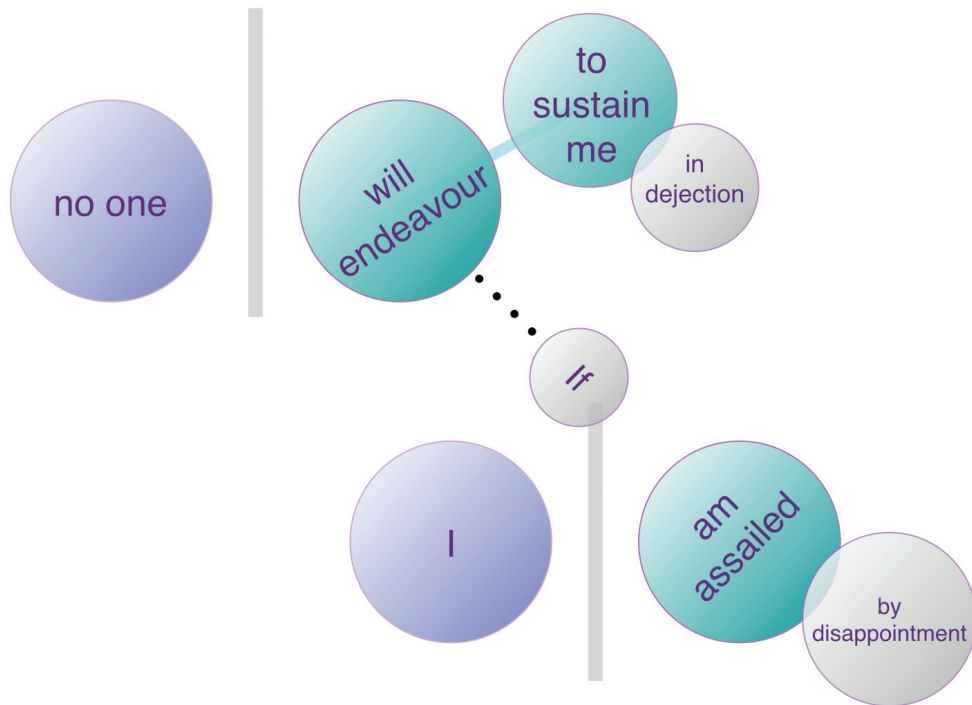
Level Four: Clauses

Now that we have examined the first three levels of grammar, let us discuss the fourth level, **clauses**. The word *clause* comes from the Latin *claudere*, to close, and this makes sense because a clause is similar to a closet that can be opened or closed. The idea is that in a clause the **subject** opens the idea, and the **predicate** closes it. Clauses close. A sentence is the opening and then the closing of an idea. We use this metaphor in other contexts too, saying that a discussion is now open or closed, or a meeting is open or closed. Sentences can be made of one clause, but they often have more than one, if the ideas have something to do with each other.

Clause: A clause is a two-sided idea, reflecting the two-sided way that we think. The two sides of our ideas are the **subject**, what a sentence is about, and the **predicate**, the part about the subject. Clauses may be **independent**, if they make sense by themselves, or **dependent**—sometimes called **subordinate**—if they do not make complete thoughts. Every sentence has at least one independent clause. Here is a one-clause sentence from Jack London’s *White Fang*: “A myriad laws governed all these things and determined conduct.” *Myriad* means many. The sentence features a **compound predicate**—in other words, a subject that has two verbs.

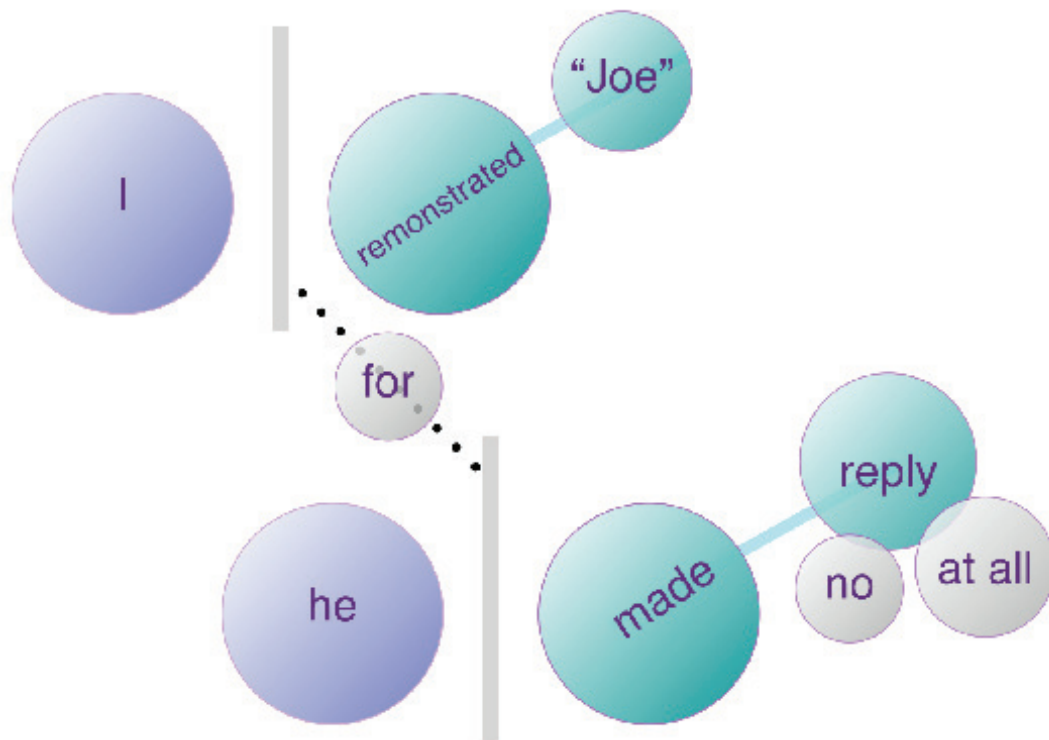


A subject with a compound verb is not two clauses, nor is a compound subject with a single verb, such as “Dickens and Austen used many of the same words.” That is only one clause. A sentence with two clauses must have two subject/predicate sets, two nuclei. Here is a **complex sentence** (an independent clause joined to a dependent clause) that has two clauses from Mary Shelley’s brilliant novel *Frankenstein*: “If I am assailed by disappointment, no one will endeavour to sustain me in dejection.”



In this sentence, the first clause, “If I am assailed by disappointment...,” is a dependent clause acting as an adverb to modify the verb in the main clause. It begins with the subordinating conjunction *If*, which all by itself renders the entire clause dependent. Without the *If*, the clause would read “I am assailed by disappointment” and would make perfectly good sense. Notice that the noun *disappointment* cannot be a direct object because it is the object of a preposition; it cannot be both. Notice also the brainpower of Mary Shelley’s vocabulary; in this one sentence she uses *endeavour*, *sustain*, *dejection*, and *assailed*. In addition to its other virtues, *Frankenstein* is a one-book vocabulary course. Using *I* for independent and *D* for dependent, we will call this complex sentence a D,I sentence, meaning that its structure is *dependent-comma-independent*. The comma is required when the dependent clause comes first.

If we compare Mary Shelley’s sentence with one by Charles Dickens in *Great Expectations*, we see an interesting difference: Shelley uses the subordinating conjunction *if*, which makes its clause dependent. Charles Dickens, on the other hand, uses the coordinating conjunction *for*, which only serves as a glue that connects the two independent clauses together. Dickens’s sentence is: “‘Joe,’ I remonstrated; for he made no reply at all.” In this sentence the coordinating conjunction *for* is not a part of the second clause; it is a connector, external to either clause. The coordinating conjunctions are *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *for*, *so*, and *yet*.



Note that the sentence begins with a direct object, which in this case is a noun of direct address. This disruption of the normal order of elements shifts emphasis to the first word and gives the scene more life.

In the t-models, a subordinating conjunction is shifted down to be visually part of the dependent clause, but a coordinating conjunction is at the mid-point of the dotted line that connects the clauses. Using *I* for independent, *D* for dependent, and *cc* for coordinating conjunction, we can say that Charles Dickens’s sentence is an I,ccI sentence: *independent-comma-coordinating conjunction-independent*. Shelley’s sentence has one main idea supported by a dependent clause; Dickens’s sentence has two main ideas connected.