Walch Toolbook Series

Grammar, Mechanics, and Usage

A Comprehensive Guide to Usage and Style

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Chapter 2: The Sentence

Background Notes

In the first chapter we were asking students to concentrate on individual words. Now we're shifting to look at groups of words. The goal is simple: We want our students to know what a sentence is. We also want them to think of words in clusters so they can see that some clusters make sense by themselves and some do not.

What to Do on Day One

I usually begin this unit by putting groups of words on the board. Then I have students tell me which groups make sense and which do not. Here are some word groups I've used. Notice, I try to vary the length of word groups, and I am sure to include punctuation in case any student thinks that's the sign of a sentence. I've also indicated for you whether groups are complete or incomplete.

1. Deep in the remote woods of Montana on the western side of the Rockies. (Incomplete)
2. March! (Complete—[You] march!)
3. While the sound of falling snow enveloped us. (Incomplete)
4. Riding a horse. (Incomplete)
5. She wept. (Complete)

Now you can begin a discussion of what is needed to make up a sentence. Students should easily be able to see it has nothing to do with length or punctuation, so try to pull in those words students know—like noun, pronoun, and verb—to see if you can get closer to the definition of a sentence. Consider this:

She desires.

Is that really a sentence? Does it truly make sense by itself? If this sentence is read in the context of a paragraph outlining the subject's hopes and dreams, it probably would, but on its own the reader is left wondering exactly what it is she so wants. Some verbs in English just beg for an object.

Questions to Ask Students

Is it ever O.K. to have a phrase or clause stand alone in writing? Do authors ever use incomplete sentences? Why?

Especially for ESL

Most ESL students have no trouble with the concept of phrases and clauses, but since we're beginning to look at groups of words, here's where they often begin to have problems with syntax. Begin to emphasize word placement and some typical patterns in English: for example, adjectives often come before nouns, and prepositional phrases always end with a noun or pronoun.

Extension Activities

Let students have fun with groups of words. Have students work with classmates and give each set some interesting word groups. Then have them identify the word groups as either phrases or clauses. Now tell them to craft some clever sentences. Encour-

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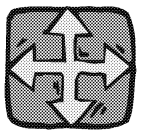
age each group to drop the word clusters into different parts of the sentence, not just at the beginning. Here are some word groups you might want to use:

1. in the heat of the moment
2. who just won $1,000,000
3. even though it was no longer fun
4. during the long hours at the video arcade
5. without his shoes on



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Chapter 2: The Sentence

You figure you've got this one nailed, right? You've been writing sentences for years and talking in them since you were two and a half. What could you possibly have to learn about the sentence?

My guess is lots.

Sometimes what *looks* like a sentence isn't, and what doesn't, is. Furthermore, knowing what each part of speech a word is won't by itself help you construct a full-fledged, honest-to-goodness, real-live sentence. You need to know what the parts of a *sentence* are so that every time you write a sentence it will be considered complete.

It's as if you're going to build a bookshelf and you have all the tools you need: wood, nails, hammer, and even a loose plan. But now you actually have to put them all together and build something that works. So that's what we're going to do. We're going to take our tools (words) and create something usable: solid sentences.

Before we even define exactly what a sentence is, let's look at what has to be in every sentence you write.

The Subject and Predicate

Every sentence has two parts: a **subject** and a **predicate**—every one, every time. If it doesn't, it's not a sentence. Let's look at each part:

The SUBJECT is the *who* or *what* of a sentence.

The PREDICATE is the *does what* or *is what* part of the sentence, which includes the verb and any words describing it.

I'll say it again: A sentence must have BOTH a SUBJECT and a PREDICATE to be complete. (But be careful, this is not the complete definition of a sentence . . . more on that soon.)

Look at this example:

The boy in the yellow raincoat jumped up and down in the large puddles.

Who or what? The boy in the yellow raincoat

Does what/is what? jumped up and down in the large puddles

Here's another example:

Urgently she lifted up the ax and hacked away.

Who or what? she

Does what/is what? urgently lifted up the ax and hacked away

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And, yet another:

The tractor broke down in the middle of the field.

Who or what? The tractor

Does what/is what? broke down in the middle of the field

Now that we know what the parts of a sentence are, we can come up with a definition:

A sentence is a group of words that expresses a complete thought.
(That means it is a group of words that makes sense to most people, most of the time.)
It must have both a subject and a predicate to be considered complete.
(That means every sentence must have at least one noun or pronoun and one verb.)

This is English-teacher Philosophy 101. We are trying to make it look really hard to understand the definition of something as simple as a sentence, but, it's not really that tough. Simply put, don't rely on punctuation to make a sentence for you. Starting a group of words with a capital letter and ending with a mark of punctuation won't turn a group of words into a sentence. Make sure the words you're stringing together make sense even if they are pulled out of the context of the paragraph you're writing. To do that you need to make sure that *every time* you write a sentence you include a complete subject (a word or group of words that say who or what) and a complete predicate (another word or group of words that say what the "who" or "what" is *doing* or *is*).

Occasionally it may be hard to find the subject or predicate, but don't give up. Look at this example: *"Kiss me!"* Is this a sentence? It appears to be only a predicate, but this is an example of a sentence with a hidden subject. The implied subject is "you," (*You kiss me!*), and so this does fit our definition of a sentence.

Exercise 2.1

Directions: In the following sentences underline the subject once (and any words that describe the subject) and underline the predicate (and words that describe it) twice. Every word in the sentence should be underlined.

1. Clarissa diligently washed my red car.
2. Stop screaming.
3. Sen's memories haunted him even after leaving Vietnam.
4. The faculty and administration decided to impose a "no hats allowed in class" policy.
5. Why did the students object?
6. Rashid and Philip have been friends since kindergarten.
7. Recently I visited Mexico.
8. The last day of school is a reason to celebrate for most students.

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9. Where were you born?

10. The fire chief and police officer worked together at the crime scene.

Notice anything? It looks as if every sentence in English starts with a subject followed by the predicate, unless it's a question. (In questions you usually have to rewrite the sentence as a statement to more easily find the subject and predicate. For example, #5 would be written as *The students did object why*. Even though that doesn't sound right, it does help to see what's the subject and what's the predicate. Once you've done that you also see that this really is another example of a sentence written with the subject first.) That is the usual format, but because we're a clever people, we try hard to mix that up a bit just to give variety to our writing. Read on.

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Phrases

Up to now we've pretty much been looking at individual words, although if you've been reading carefully you probably noticed how often I try to get you to think about the connections between words. That's because many sentences have groups of words acting together to further explain the subject or predicate. Let's start learning the technical definitions for these clusters of words.

A PHRASE is a group of words that acts as a unit. The unit acts as a noun, an adjective, or an adverb. A phrase does not have both a subject and a predicate.

What I think is most important about that definition is that you never think of a phrase as a sentence. Sometimes it looks as if a phrase has a subject or a predicate, but the key is it doesn't have *both*, so it can never stand alone as a sentence. Instead, it's just part of a sentence that tells us more about the subject or predicate.

Types of Phrases

There are four types of phrases. While I don't think it's necessary for you to memorize and define each type, I do think it's important for you to recognize a group of words acting as a phrase when you see one. I also think it's cool to begin thinking of the implications phrases can have on your writing. Phrases give you a way to add variety to your writing and to mix up the patterns of your sentences. (See Chapter Six for more details.)

1. The Prepositional Phrase

This is the most common type of phrase. It's a group of words starting with a preposition and ending with a noun or pronoun (known as the *object* of the preposition). There may be several other descriptive words in between the preposition and the noun or pronoun at the end, but at the very minimum the phrase must have at least two words.

Examples		
	under the table	to me
	with the large nose ring	after the operation

If you haven't already done so, I strongly urge you to memorize the list of common prepositions on page 28. I am not the kind of person who thinks there's much in the world important enough to memorize, but this does happen to be one place where I become the bespectacled, bun-in-the-hair English teacher. If you can point to a prepositional phrase in a sentence you immediately know something about the words in that phrase: the subject of the sentence is not in that phrase. Let me repeat:

The subject of a sentence is never, never, never in a prepositional phrase.

Trust me. It will become important later on that you can find the subject of a

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sentence. Knowing you don't have to waste your time looking inside a prepositional phrase is helpful.

Here's another important thing you need to know about all phrases: Entire phrases can be used as a part of speech. Prepositional phrases can either be an **adjective** or **adverb**.

The prepositional phrase acting as an adjective:

The boys **in the band** played the kazoo. (Which boys?)

The dress **with the sequins** is blue. (What kind of dress?)

The prepositional phrase acting as an adverb:

He ran **down the alley** hoping to find an escape. (Where did he run?)

The boy sat **between his mother and father at the trial.**

(There are actually two phrases in that sentence. Where did he sit? When did he do it?)

One more thing about prepositional phrases: You can usually take them out of a sentence entirely and still have a complete sentence. All prepositional phrases do is add more information or description about the basic idea of the sentence.

Verbals

The next three types of phrases are classified as **verbals** because they start with some form of the verb. Big deal, you think. Actually, it is. In fact, when I learned about these, my writing changed. Fireworks exploded and whistles blew in my head because I found a way to start a sentence that looked like I was beginning with the predicate part even when I wasn't. (O.K., I'll tell you the truth, I didn't really realize what I was doing, I just knew my writing seemed to have more drama to it.) So, pay attention to these next three types of phrases. They are very cool.

2. The Gerund Phrase

Here's what happens. You take a verb, you add *-ing*, and presto—that verb becomes a noun. Watch.

Examples	**Voting on election day** is an important part of being a good citizen. (Can you see it? That gerund phrase is acting as the subject of the sentence, so therefore it must be a noun.) **By voting** on election day you become a good citizen.

(Now we have a gerund phrase with the gerund being used as the object of the preposition *by*, and since we know every prepositional phrase ends with a noun or pronoun, **voting** must be a noun. As a side note, some grammar types would call the entire phrase **By voting on election day** the gerund phrase, and you can, too, since it all flows together. Or, you can call it a gerund phrase connected to a prepositional phrase—you get to decide how picky you want to be.)

Doesn't it seem as if you're starting a sentence with the predicate? The *feel* of a

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gerund is action and even if you're the only person who knows what you're doing, who cares? You've made your writing better, and that's what really counts.

3. The Infinitive Phrase

This phrase is made up of the word *to* plus a verb, and suddenly you've got two words acting like a **noun**, an **adjective**, or an **adverb**.

Examples	to pretend to play to go to think **To learn English before returning to Burma** is Aung's goal. (The infinitive phrase here is the subject of the sentence, so it's a noun.) Aung had the desire and the motivation **to learn English before returning to Burma**. (The infinitive phrase is describing the desire and motivation, so it's an adjective.) Aung studies **to learn**. (Why does Aung study? The infinitive phrase answers the verb's question, so it's an adverb.)

Usually, you will find the infinitive is used as a noun, but it is possible to use it as those other parts of speech. One thing you need to be careful about is being able to tell when the word "to" is an infinitive and when it's a preposition. Look at the following, and put parentheses around the infinitive phrase and then circle the prepositional phrase:

To go to the circus is fun.

4. The Participial Phrase

In Chapter 1 you saw that the participle is one of the basic parts of a verb. You can have a present participle, which is the verb plus *-ing*, or its past, which is usually the verb plus *-ed* or one of the gazillion exceptions ending in *-d*, *-t*, *-en*, or *-n*. When the participle is hooked up with other descriptive words to become a participial phrase, the entire phrase acts as an **adjective**. That's important to remember because sometimes when you see a verb ending in *-ing* you might assume it's a gerund, so you have to figure out if the phrase is acting as a noun or an adjective.

Examples	**Shaking the dust behind him**, Sherlock left Texas forever. (The phrase is telling us more about the noun Sherlock, so it's an adjective.) I found an old suitcase **filled with dirty clothing**. (Which suitcase? The one filled with dirty clothing—so once again we have a participial phrase describing the noun.)

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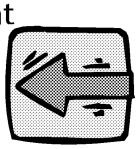
Remember, it's not critical for you to memorize the types of phrases and then methodically plop them in your writing. I'm not sure it's even necessary to be able to tell how a phrase is being used or even which one is being used in any given sentence. (Unless, of course, you're one of those people who delights in knowing details.) What is important, however, is for you to begin to see phrases as friends that can improve your writing. The prepositional phrase is simply a way to add information to a sentence, but the verbals can put a whole new spin on a sentence. If you feel like your writing has no "pep" to it and every sentence has the same pattern, look at the verb in the sentence. See if you can begin the sentence with a verbal phrase to make it look like your sentence is starting with action. It's a sure-fire way to add some spice to whatever it is you're writing.

Exercise 2.2

Directions: In the sentences below, underline each group of words acting as a phrase. Many sentences have more than one phrase. If you're feeling especially clever, see if you can explain what type of phrase each is, and how it is being used.

1. That book on the shelf in the center of the library is a classic.
2. The dog jumped over the fence, into the alley, and around the corner to avoid being caught by the dogcatcher.
3. Fighting a severe stomach flu, Louise went to school anyway so she wouldn't miss learning more about grammar.
4. To make the basketball team is Maggie's goal.
5. The student hoped to become a writer herself one day.
6. That child drawing all over the wall is my son.
7. Driving a car at 16 is perfectly legal in most states.
8. Ms. Cleveland, our inspirational speech teacher, is so dynamic that her classes actually can't wait to speak in front of large audiences.
9. Leaping to her feet, Zoe ran to the stage when the magician asked for a volunteer from the audience.
10. The waitress at the restaurant was so slow we began to wonder if our food would ever come.



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Clauses

Like phrases, clauses are groups of words that act together in a sentence. But the difference between phrases and clauses is great.

A CLAUSE is a group of words that has a complete subject and a complete predicate.

There are two types of clauses:

1. **An Independent clause—This is just another name for a sentence. It's a group of words that has a subject and a predicate and expresses a complete thought.**
2. **A Dependent Or subordinating clause—This is a group of words that has a subject and a predicate, but cannot stand alone as a sentence.**

Independent clauses are just that—independent. They are groups of words that can stand alone. They need no further explanation since they're just a fancier way of defining what a sentence is.

Dependent or subordinating clauses need to be looked at more closely. As their name implies, they are groups of words that depend on something else (the rest of the sentence) to make sense. Look at the groups of words below. Both of them contain a subject (the noun or pronoun the sentence is written about) and a predicate (the verb and other words that tell us what the subject is or is doing). But can these groups of words stand alone?

If the rain ever stops.

When the fall comes.

Yes, there is a subject and a predicate, but these groups of words don't make sense by themselves. They need the rest of the sentence to complete the thought. Now look:

If the rain ever stops, I'll be able to work in my garden.

When the fall comes, it's apple-picking time.

Now we've got a group of words that makes sense. In each of the two examples above, we have a dependent and an independent clause working together to create one understandable sentence. But, in reality, who cares?

Actually, no one.

All anybody really wants you to know is, don't be fooled by everything you know. Just because a sentence has a noun or pronoun and a verb (a subject and a predicate) don't assume you've got a true sentence on your hands. You've got to be sure those words make sense or else you don't really have a sentence.

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Exercise 2.3

Directions: Just to show off, in the sentences below underline the independent clauses once and the dependent clauses twice.

1. My friend, who is Italian, is an excellent cook.

2. Because it looked like rain, the game was canceled.

3. I want to visit Ireland someday, since it's supposed to be a beautiful country.

4. My favorite book, which was written by Betty Smith, is *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.

5. Although skiing is an expensive hobby, the joy of schussing down the slopes outweighs the pain of forking over so much cash.

6. The family whose dog always roams the neighborhood lives on the corner.

7. The car that I like best is a Porsche.

8. When Peter is on the playground, he always makes new friends.

9. Wherever you visit in Germany, you are reminded of the effects of World War II.

10. Unless you've been through an exercise program, you have no idea how much your life can change when fitness becomes part of your everyday life.

    (There are actually two dependent clauses in this sentence.)