

## Verb Use in Different Sentence Structures

You may be surprised to learn that, in spite of the apparent complexity of English sentences, there are only a few basic patterns into which words can be arranged and still make sense. We will examine five essential sentence patterns, which you should think of as the fundamental units of communication. If you learn to recognize these five patterns, you will feel more secure in your study of more complicated sentences, most of which are combinations of essential sentences or well-defined alterations of them. We will address some of these combinations, as well as some typical errors in sentence structure below.

Each of the five essential sentence types can be distinguished from the others by the nature of the **verb**, that is, whether or not it can make a satisfactory statement without the addition of another unit, or “completer” (such as an object or complement).

### Basic sentence structures

Verbs that are complete in themselves are called intransitive verbs.

**Sentence pattern #1** contains an intransitive verb and is the only basic sentence that does not require a complement:

The rain fell.  
Birds fly.  
Children run.

We will represent this structural pattern as **SV**, which stands for subject-verb. Realistically, however, sentences falling into pattern #1 generally contain modifiers:

Sometimes the neighborhood children run happily down the street.

**Sentence pattern #2** involves transitive instead of intransitive verbs. In these sentences, the verb names some activity of which the subject is the doer (as in pattern #1). But in a pattern #2 sentence, the subject and verb, even with the addition of modifiers, do not give a complete statement because the activity named by the verb is performed on something which must be named to **complete** the verb:

(Subject)	(Verb)	(Direct Object)
I	ate	lunch.

The kind of completer required with a transitive verb is the **direct object**. It names the receiver of the action. We can represent this pattern as **SVO<sub>d</sub>**, meaning subject-verb-direct object.

Usually this pattern will include numerous other words as well, such as articles, modifiers, etc.:

Yesterday, I ate a rather large lunch with my sister.

In **sentence pattern #3**, we include two closely related kinds of sentences. These sentences use a special kind of intransitive verb called **linking verbs** so that the complement **renames** or **describes** the subject of the sentence and is therefore called a **subject complement**. We will represent pattern #3 as **SVC<sub>s</sub>**, meaning subject-verb-subject complement:

- a) The child is a genius. (Subject complement renames subject)
- b) The child is smart. (Subject complement describes subject)

The most common linking verb is **be**. Unfortunately, **be** is not a regular verb; therefore you should memorize its various forms: am, is, are, was, were, be, been, being.

Sentences in **pattern #4** are similar to those in **pattern #2**, except that in pattern #4 they contain two objects: an indirect object and a direct object. The direct object answers the question “Who?” or “What?” after the transitive verb. The indirect object answers a question such as “To whom (or which)?” or “For whom (or which)?” after the verb. Thus in the sentence “She sang a lullaby” we have a pattern #2 sentence, but in “She sang the baby a lullaby” we have a pattern #4:

(Subject)	(verb)	(indirect object)	(direct object)
She	sang	the baby	a lullaby.

Nearly all pattern #4 sentences can be rewritten as pattern #2 sentences by using a prepositional phrase, the preposition usually being **to** or **for**:

She sang a lullaby to the baby.

Pattern #4 sentences can be represented as **SVO<sub>i</sub>O<sub>d</sub>** to designate the structure subject-verb-indirect object-direct object.

**Pattern #5** sentences, like pattern #3 sentences, consist of two closely related types of sentences. There are two completers (elements necessary to complete the sentence meaning) in pattern #5 sentences. The element closer to the verb is the direct object **O<sub>d</sub>** and the second element is the objective complement **O<sub>c</sub>**, which may be either a noun that renames the direct object or an adjective that describes the direct object:

(subject)	(verb)	(direct object)	(noun object complement)
<i>The parents</i>	<i>consider</i>	<i>their child</i>	<i>a genius.</i>
(subject)	(verb)	(direct object)	(adjective object complement)
<i>The parents</i>	<i>consider</i>	<i>their child</i>	<i>smart.</i>

Pattern #5 sentences will be represented as **SVO<sub>d</sub>O<sub>c</sub>** to designate the structure subject-verb-direct object-object complement.

### **Incomplete Sentences:**

An incomplete sentence, or sentence fragment, is part of a sentence (a phrase or clause) punctuated as if it were a whole sentence. Fragments are common in everyday speech,

See you later.                      Could be trouble.                      Just a minute.

in informal writing,

Just a note to let you know that I got the loan. Sure will make things easier next semester.

and in advertising, journalism, and literature, where they are often used to produce certain effects or impressions. You should not use them, however, until you are able to distinguish between effective and ineffective ones.

### **Criteria for sentence completeness:**

A sentence must include a subject.

A sentence must include a finite verb.

A sentence cannot consist of a dependent clause alone, --i.e., a clause that begins with a subordinating conjunction. If so, it is a fragment and must be attached to an independent clause.

A sentence cannot start with a relative pronoun (who, which, how, where, when or why) and have only one verb. Such a "sentence" must be attached to an independent clause.

A sentence cannot consist merely of a modifying phrase. (For instance, a prepositional phrase)