

GRAMMAR: A QUICK TOUR

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“Grammar” describes both the organization of the parts of speech that make up language and the accepted ways a particular language is organized to make meaning. That is, English grammar is made of building blocks similar to those of other languages like Mandarin, Urdu, Greek, Latin, but these building blocks are organized in ways unique to English. The “rules” of each grammar develop from usage: centuries of people using a language. So grammar can be said to **DESCRIBE** (not **PRESCRIBE**) how a language works. This makes the rules of grammar less like laws that you might break, with terrible consequences, and more like social behaviours (like being polite) that you can learn in order to do things with words that gets you the responses you want.

Prepositions locate the reader in space, showing spatial relationships.

EG: *at, by, for, from, in, on, over, to, of, with*

Co-ordinating conjunctions show and evaluate logical connective relationships between ideas or parts of sentences.

EG: *and, but, for, nor, or, so, yet*

Phrases are groups of words that belong together.

EG: noun phrases, verb phrases, prepositional phrases

Noun phrase: a noun plus any adjectives or indexical/pointing words: *this, that, those, a, an, the*

EG: *a book*
the dull party
the charitable doctor
an attractive Yaletown apartment

Verb phrase: a verb plus any modifiers (adverbs) and anything following it

EG: *was purchased*
easily jumped the fence
drives 100 miles daily

Prepositional Phrase: a preposition and a noun phrase together. (They modify nouns, verbs, and adjectives.)

EG: *in the subway*
on the river
of the two

Clauses are more complete groupings of words that belong together. There are two kinds: those clauses that can stand as sentences are called **independent (or main) clauses**; those clauses that cannot stand by themselves as

sentences are called **dependent (or subordinate) clauses** and are typically preceded by introductory words such as *because, after, whom, until, that, or which* (see overleaf).

Independent Clauses:

<i>Monica</i> (subject)	<i>visited her uncle</i> (predicate).
<i>Barack Obama</i> (subject)	<i>spoke eloquently</i> (predicate).
<i>A good friend</i> (subject)	<i>is hard to find</i> (predicate).

Dependant Clauses:

(introductory word)	(subject)	(predicate)
<i>Because</i>	<i>the hurricane</i>	<i>struck</i>
<i>after</i>	<i>the dance</i>	<i>is over</i>
<i>whom</i>	<i>her uncle</i>	<i>hired</i>
<i>that</i>	<i>he</i>	<i>could lie so unskilfully</i>
<i>until</i>	<i>the Vikings</i>	<i>won York.</i>

Dependent clauses cannot stand alone. If they are on their own, they can be called **sentence fragments** and marked as errors. Dependent clauses also require careful thought to use as a part of a complete sentence; **modification errors** tend to arise because of them.

EG: *With the taste of victory in his mouth, an ankle twisted and John lost the race.* (misplaced preposition phrase/dependent clause).

Also: *To be truly tasty, you should broil lobster, then dip in butter.* (misplaced infinitive phrase)

In both cases, what follows the dependent clause is NOT what that dependent clause is about, but it SHOULD be.

Sentences: As mentioned above, an independent clause can also function on its own as a sentence, which in this most basic form consists of a noun phrase and a finite verb phrase (sometime called a predicate). The noun phrase (NP) can be as simple as “I” and the verb phrase (VP) can be as simple as “see.” “I see,” you might say, and you would have uttered a complete sentence. Noun phrases (subjects) and finite verb phrases (predicates) can be quite long too.

Consider: *The capable and enthusiastic linguistics professor* (NP) *gently cajoled her class of trembling undergraduate students* (VP).

And: *I* (NP) *see* (VP).

If you made it to the end of this handout, then you are probably ready to hear that grammar is a fascinating area of study. If you want to know more, a good beginner’s guide is Stanley Cook and Richard Suter’s *The Scope of Grammar: A Study of Modern English*. Boston, MA: McGraw Hill, 1980.