THE PARTS OF SPEECH

Verbs
A verb expresses action or a state of being. Action verbs are obvious: hit, slam, kiss, dance, write. But not all verbs show action. Some tell what something is, feels, or looks like. This kind of verb is called a linking verb.

- The horse jumped. (Action verb.)
- The horse kicked me. (Action verb.)
- The horse looks sick. (Linking verb.)
- That horse is a mare. (Linking verb.)

Helping verbs add information to main verbs. Generally, they tell when something happened, that it will happen, or that it might happen.

- He has been teaching here since 1982. (The main verb is “teaching.” The helping verb is “has been”; it tells us that he started an action in 1982 and continues it in the present.)
- He had been teaching here for a long time, but he quit last year. (The helping verb “had been” tells us that the action—“teaching”—began at some point in the past and stopped at a later point in the past. Do you see the difference between “has been” and “had been”?)
- He will retire next year. (The helping verb “will” tells us that the main verb is in the future tense; the action will occur in the future.)

Nouns
A noun names a person, place, thing, idea, emotion, quality, or action.

- man
- book
- happiness
- philosophy
- rage
- town
- liberty
- strength
- history
- pity

Verbs can sometimes function as nouns. In We danced all night, dance is a verb in the past tense; it expresses an action. In We have been dancing since 8:00, the main verb dancing has the helping verbs have been.

But in Dancing is good exercise, the word Dancing acts like a noun. Dancing is the name of an activity, and it functions as the grammatical subject of the sentence. When a verb + ing (dance + ing = dancing) acts like a noun, it is called a gerund. In Dancing is good exercise, the verb is the linking verb is.

Some words, then, can be more than one part of speech. Whether dancing is a noun or a verb depends on its job in the sentence. So a big part of understanding grammar and writing good sentences is figuring out what each word is doing in a sentence.

- I caught a fish. (Fish names a type of creature, and is therefore a noun.)
- I fish for trout. (Fish is an action and therefore a verb.)
- I have been fishing since I was a toddler. (Fishing is a verb, helped by have been.)
- Fishing is my favorite pastime. (Fishing is the name of an activity and therefore a noun.)
Pronouns

Pronouns take the place of nouns. They add variety to the language by letting us avoid repeating nouns.

Sue opened her book vs. Sue opened Sue’s book.
Bob said that he had to go. vs. Bob said that Bob had to go.

**Personal pronouns** refer to people or things. This group includes such words as he, she, it, they, you.

The dog bit him. He bit the dog back.

**Demonstrative pronouns** point out or identify something or someone. This group includes this, that, these, those.

Those are some ugly children. But this is a cute baby.

**Relative pronouns** relate one thing or idea to another. The relative pronouns are who, whom, whose, which, that.

A student who never studies will not pass the course.
A store that advertises will probably have more customers than one that doesn’t.

**Indefinite pronouns** refer to someone or something general. This group includes words such as anybody, each, everyone, none, few, many, all, some.

Many are called, but few are chosen.

Adjectives

Adjectives describe—or modify—nouns or pronouns. They add information.

I drive a red truck.
My red truck has a bench seat.
The big, snarling dog chased the screaming child along the muddy road. (And note that screaming can be any of three parts of speech. **Verb:** That brat has been screaming for an hour. **Noun:** I hope all the screaming hurts his throat. **Adjective:** I hate screaming brats.)

Adverbs

Adverbs describe or modify verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs. They answer questions such as How? When? Where? How often? Many adverbs end in -ly.

The poison killed him instantly.
She quickly decided to drop her English course.
He slowly realized that the teacher was crazy.

Prepositions

Prepositions show or indicate a relationship between things or ideas. This category includes above, beneath, around, through, to, for, at, over, by, in, into, toward, with, from, upon, beside, and lots of other words.

His English class is in Oconee Hall.
The oil pan is below the crankcase.

A preposition is followed by a noun. The noun is called the object of the preposition. The preposition and its object make a prepositional phrase.

His English class is in Oconee Hall. (in Oconee Hall is a prepositional phrase.)
The oil pan is below the crankcase. (below the crankcase is a prepositional phrase.)
We went to the movie after dinner. (after dinner is a prepositional phrase.)
**Conjunctions**

Conjunctions join other words. There are two kinds of conjunctions.

**Coordinating conjunctions** join things of roughly equal weight. There are seven of them: **and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet**.

- I asked her to marry me, but she said no.
- She left work early, and then she went shopping.

**Subordinating conjunctions** join things of unequal weight; they connect ideas by making one dependent on the other. A subordinating conjunction often shows a cause-and-effect relationship. Subordinating conjunctions are such words as **after, although, because, since, unless, until**.

- His boat sank because he forgot the drain plug.
- Since you’re here early, we might as well have a drink.

In grammar, the words that follow a subordinating conjunction are called a dependent clause. It is a dependent clause because, by definition, it cannot stand on its own as a sentence. More—much more—on this later.

- His boat sank *because he forgot the drain plug*. (The underlined part—*because he forgot the drain plug*—is the dependent clause; it cannot stand on its own as a sentence.)

**Interjections**

Interjections are words that show excitement—Wow! Yippy! Damn!

**Clauses and Phrases**

A **clause** is a group of words that makes a statement. A clause contains a subject and a predicate. There are two types of clauses: dependent and independent. An independent clause can stand on its own as a complete sentence. A dependent clause cannot stand on its own; it must be attached to an independent clause.

- The baby cried is an independent clause; it has a subject and a predicate (a verb).
- In *The baby cried because she was hungry, because she was hungry* is a dependent clause. It has a subject (she) and a verb (was), but it cannot stand as a sentence. Think about it: *Because she was hungry* does not express a complete thought, does it? It cannot be independent.

A **phrase** is a group of words that does not have both a subject and a predicate. A phrase has the same grammatical function in a sentence as a single word. In *The plane will arrive in 20 minutes*, the prepositional phrase *in 20 minutes* functions as an adverb. The phrase *in 20 minutes* modifies (describes) the plane’s arrival.

- *I decided to study engineering at Clemson University*. Here, *to study engineering* is an infinitive (verbal) phrase that completes the meaning of *decided* (by telling us what he decided); *at Clemson University* is a prepositional phrase that functions as an adverb to modify *study* (by telling us where he will study). Each phrase functions as a part of speech.

A phrase is **not** a complete thought. It does not have a subject and a verb.