THE GRAMMARGATOR GUIDE

FOR TEACHERS

By Jo Ann Zimmerman

A NOTE TO TEACHERS

Welcome to the wide world of grammar!

Once upon a time in America, students spent their schooldays parsing passive verb constructions, slaving over subject-verb agreement, and anguishing about antecedents. Those were the days.

Reformers are quick (and correct) to note that much about education has improved since the era of Warriner's and wolf bane. As English teachers, we rightly stress reading comprehension and the writing process over rote memorization of arcane grammar rules. We immerse students in rich literary experiences and use the latest technology our districts can afford to engage students in writing for real purposes. Yet too many students still struggle to read and write. What are we doing wrong?

In truth, the problem may be what we are not doing. With all of the other legitimate demands on an English teacher's time, it has been easy to let grammar slide. Standardized tests rarely assess it directly. It doesn't seem to fit naturally into our "units." And those of us who came of age after the slide rule often have little background in grammar ourselves, certainly not enough to be comfortable teaching it. There is a solution.

This Grammargator Guide for Teachers is a unique resource for English teachers who want to see what direct instruction in language mechanics can do for their students. While not exhaustive, it is nonetheless comprehensive. Terms and conventions are defined in plain English with copious examples from life and literature. And once you've brushed up the grammar skills you need to know, there's no need to find a place for it in your teaching day.

Grammar, like vocabulary, is best learned in context. The Grammargator Guides you can use with your students are companion exercises for the children's and young adult literature you are already teaching. The sentences taken from these texts model correct grammar while they reinforce reading comprehension. It's that simple.

There is nothing to lose, and a roomful of writers to lead.

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ABOUT GRAMMARGATOR

Grammargator was created by Jo Ann Zimmerman (but call me Al), a K-8 Reading Specialist and Language Arts teacher who got tired of trying of trying to make time for EVERYTHING (reading comprehension, vocabulary, character analysis, plot sequencing, setting, literary devices, writing every whichaway) and rarely finding a moment for grammar. She knew her students needed to learn it (the first writing assignment made that clear every year). But they needed to learn everything else, too.

And so, lacking a magic wand to turn a 40 minute period into 80, she hit upon the idea of incorporating grammar exercises into the chapter book and young adult novel units her students were already doing! The result is Grammargator, a unique, effective, and efficient method for teaching grammar in context while also reinforcing key reading skills.

Each Grammargator Guide contains 12 worksheets of 20 sentences taken directly from the book students are reading. Each group of sentences focuses on a specific grammar skill, such as locating the subject of a sentence, identifying verb tenses, or finding a pronoun's antecedent. They are the perfect exercises to accompany summer reading assignments, use as pre-tests, practice newly learned skills, review skills taught earlier, or use as extra practice for individual students in need of more review. Many teachers use them as quizzes, too.

And since even Grammargator couldn't magically create more time in the day, each guide contains a complete answer key for easy grading.

See ya later,

Grammargator

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CHAPTER 1: MEET THE CAST

THE NOUN

A rose by any other name would smell as sweet, and it would still be a **noun**. That's because a noun is defined as the name of a person, place, thing or idea. **Proper nouns** (Rose Kennedy, Pete Rose, The Rose Garden) name a specific person, place or thing. As in the above examples, they are usually capitalized. Everything else (a daisy, a matriarch, a gambler, a garden) is considered a **common noun**. Unless a common noun is the first word in a sentence, it is usually not capitalized.

Nouns are often taught first among the parts of speech, perhaps because they're kind of in-your-face. People, places, and things are everywhere; one can hardly avoid them. It's those **ideas** that can trip people up.

Nouns that name intangibles, such as truth, justice, and the American way, can sometimes be difficult to recognize. Some of them, for example, truth, can appear with or without a determiner:

Truth in lending laws
The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth

Many of these **abstract** nouns can be recognized by their endings:

The bluebird of happi*ness*
In the neighbor*hood*
Secretary of Educa*tion*
Audac*ity* of hope
Commercial*ism*
That's entertain***ment***!

Of course, there are also gerunds and infinitives—verbs that act like nouns—but Grammargator suggests not going there until at least eighth grade. Maybe seventh, if you're willing to grade on a generous curve.

<u>LIONS AND TIGERS AND BEARS</u> oh, my…

Most nouns in English form the *plural* by adding "s" or "es" (roses, gardens, entertainments). But language, like life, is seldom that simple. It's women and children first; are we mice or are we men? People (not persons) who speak English just have to live with these lovable quirks.

Some nouns include more than one person or thing without becoming plural. **Collective** nouns such as family, team, committee, and orchestra all denote multiple entities but are singular in form, as in "The home team *is* leading, 4-1." A particular team, however, is almost always considered plural: "The Phillies *are* world champions." Collective nouns can, of course, be made plural: "The Phillies are one of several *teams* looking to improve *their* starting rotation."

DEAL, OR NO DEAL?

Many teachers tell their students to use various "tests" on a word to shake out its "nounness." These can be helpful so long as we all remember that English is a funky language and there is no such thing as one size fits all. That being said, here are a few tests that work most (but not all) of the time:

1. Try putting an article (the, an, a) in front of the word and see if it makes sense. The teacher, a student, an election. (Notice this doesn't work for justice, unless you're talking about Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and then it's capitalized.)

2. Can you make the word plural? "Teachers and students voted in recent elections." (But we can't say bluebird of happinesses.)

3. Can you make the word possessive? "Teachers' and students' votes influenced the election's outcome." (Which brings up the question of fairness, yet another exception.)

My personal favorite is the Jeopardy! test. It's simple: Just try using the word as an answer to a Jeopardy! question.

Alex: For $400, according to the Beatles, "this" is a warm gun.

You: What is "happiness?"

Alex: Correct!

You: I'll take Potpourri for $800.

Alex: For $800, "this" is a hard teacher, because it gives the test first and the lesson after.

You: Uh, what is "experience?"

I like this test because it does cover abstract nouns that don't form plurals or possessives. It even works for gerunds and infinitives! (Not that you're teaching those—trust me on this.) The Jeopardy! test probably doesn't cover *all* nouns, but it's pretty good. And it's fun!

THE VERB

Verbs drive sentences; they tell us what the nouns are doing or being. What light through yonder window *breaks*? It *is* the East, and Juliet *is* the Sun.

The easiest verbs to find are **action** verbs. The screen door *slams*, Mary's dress *waves*. **State-of-being** verbs, often called **linking** verbs, connect the subject of the sentence to the predicate without performing action. I *am* the egg man. You *are* so beautiful to me.

Both types of verbs separate the subject of a sentence from the **predicate** (the verb and everything that comes after it in the main clause). Action verbs often have **objects**, while linking verbs are followed by **predicate nominatives** and/or **predicate adjectives**. Predicate nominatives tell us what the subject of the sentence is (I am the *walrus*); predicate adjectives describe the subject (She was just *seventeen*.)

I OBJECT!

Action verbs are further divided into those that take objects (**transitive verbs**) and those that don't (**intransitive verbs**). Here are some examples:

TRANSITIVE	INTRANSITIVE
Take	Smile
Hit	Fall
Throw	Talk

For transitive verbs such as take, we need to know the answer to the question "Who or what is being taken?" A sentence that reads simply "I take" is incomplete without an object. On the opposite side, we *cannot* ask "who or what is being fallen?" because the verb "fall" is intransitive and cannot take an object.

Grammar being what it is, there are some verbs that can be transitive or intransitive (context is everything). For example, "She stands" is a complete sentence without any object. However, we can also say "She can't stand the sound of bagpipes." In this context, stand is transitive, taking the object "sound."

To describe things that happened in the past, or will happen in the future, verbs take a variety of forms and tenses. See Chapter 3, Back to the Future, for more on those.

ADJECTIVES

Adjectives are *delightful*, *delicious*, and *de-lovely*. They make the grass of home *green*, the engine that could *little*, and the Marines *few* and *proud*. An adjective's job is to **modify**, or describe, nouns. And they stick pretty close to them in a sentence, so they're usually easy to find.

Another way to identify an adjective is to look for answers to certain questions about the noun it is next to. Does it tell what kind (a *red, red* rose)? Which one (the *ugly* American, the *invisible* man)? How many (*five* guys named Moe)? If so, you've got an adjective on your hands.

Adjectives are not all or nothing words. They can, and do, modify nouns to varying degrees. How *sharper* than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child (the **comparative** degree). Not the *sharpest* tool in the shed (the **superlative** degree). Adjectives with more than one syllable (that do not end in –y) form the comparative and superlative degrees by adding *more* or *most* before them (the most beautiful).

When adjectives gang up on a sentence (the *good*, the *bad*, and the *ugly*) they become **collective adjectives**. The determiner (*the*) in front of them tells us that in a herd, these adjectives act like nouns. Unlike collective nouns, however, collective adjectives are always plural. Thus, only the *lonely* know, not knows, the way I feel tonight.

ADVERBS

Adverbs *really* give people fits. They seem to be *very* difficult to teach, too. Many teachers would *quite gladly* skip over them altogether.

To begin with, whoever started the *ugly* rumor that **adverbs** end in –ly is at the top of my wet noodle list. This "rule" crosses people up both ways; not only do many adverbs not end in –ly, many words that end in –ly are not adverbs. If you drive *fast*, you won't get home *late*. And a person can be *gangly*, *portly*, *friendly*, or *lovely*, all adjectives.

Things go from bad to worse when we try to show how adverbs are different from adjectives. Students grasp at the dictum that "adjectives modify nouns and adverbs modify verbs," then zone out on the rest. In reality, adverbs are *much more* versatile than adjectives. In addition to verbs, adverbs can modify adjectives and other adverbs.

In the sentence "Adverbs *really* give people fits," really modifies the verb give. But "They seem to be *very* difficult to teach" has the adverb *very* modifying an adjective, difficult. And in "Many teachers would *quite* gladly skip over them altogether," *quite* modifies the adverb gladly.

I have found that students understand adverbs much better with the "what question does it answer" approach. Remember that adjectives answer the questions what kind, which one, and how many. Adverbs tell us where, when, how, why, to what extent, and under what conditions something happens.

- *How* do we roll along? *Merrily*!
- *When* will we have Paris? *Always*
- Round, round, get around, I get *where?* *Around*
- *To what extent* do my arms long to hold you so? *More* than you'll ever know

Adverbs are also trickier than adjectives because they can show up pretty much anywhere in a sentence. Consider the following:

I can see *clearly now*
Now I can see *clearly*
I can *now* see *clearly*
Clearly I can see *now*
Now I can *clearly* see
Now, *clearly*, I can see

Sometimes sprinkling adverbs carelessly results in a different meaning than the writer intended. A particularly gross offender is the adverb *only*, which tends to rub off on the word it's closest to. If you want to say that parking is for customers only, put it next to customers, not parking, where it suggests that customers may park only. This presumably would preclude their shopping.

PREPOSITIONS see Chapter 4, Above and Beyond

PRONOUNS

The many types of English **pronouns** (literally words that stand in for nouns) give us such a dizzying variety of ways to avoid saying exactly who or what we're talking about that it's no wonder they're so confusing.

She was a long cool woman in a black dress.
Anything goes.
Who's on first?
These are the times *that* try men's souls.
We have nothing to fear but fear *itself*.

In the first example, *she* is a **personal pronoun** standing in for an unnamed person (perhaps the writer is being discreet). Although English doesn't really care about the case or gender of nouns, these do matter when choosing pronoun substitutes. Chapter 6, He Said, She Said, has a table of personal pronouns, along with information about finding their antecedents.

In "*Anything* goes," the writer is being even less definite than he was about that long cool woman; we may not know her name, but we might be able to pick her out of a crowd. *Anything* could mean, well, anything. Aptly called **indefinite pronouns**, words such as somebody, nothing, and everyone stand in for unknown or indeterminate people or things. They, too, are discussed more fully in Chapter 6.

The pronoun types found in the last three examples aren't covered in Chapter 6 because they don't appear in our Grammar Guides for students. But Grammargator will not leave you hanging.

Who's on first, the classic Abbott and Costello baseball sketch, makes brilliant use of a variety of **interrogative pronouns**, to great comic effect. The interrogative pronouns *who, whose, whoever, what*, and *which* are used to begin a question. *Who*'s on

first? *What*'s the name of the guy on third? They qualify as pronouns because they stand in for the answers to the questions, and the answers are nouns.

"*These* are the times *that* try men's souls" is a two-fer, employing first a demonstrative, then a relative pronoun. **Demonstrative pronouns** point to nouns, literally. Students usually get demonstrative pronouns pretty easily by being taught that they stand in for something you can point to. Which are the times that try men's souls? These. I got your trying times right here, pal.

Demonstrative pronouns must lead charmed lives because you will often see an adjective trying to pass for one. That's how it is *these* days. When these, those, this, and that (but not the other) appear in front of a noun, trying to steal its thunder, they can't be pronouns; there's a real noun right there. Instead, they modify the noun, telling us which one—*these* little town blues, will *this* hand ne'er be clean. So don't be fooled by cheap imitations.

Last, and certainly least (understood) are **relative pronouns**, *which* can be a real bear to teach. The good news is there are only four of them. The bad news is those four are *who*, *whose, which*, and *that* (yes, *that* again). Some grammar texts explain them as words that relate words in a dependent clause to a noun (or pronoun) in the main clause. I find that definition clear as mud, and it has gotten me nowhere fast with my students.

To be honest, I usually don't teach relative pronouns until I'm ready to introduce the whole megillah of clauses, *which* again, I don't recommend doing until around eighth grade. For those *who* are really keen to know more about relative pronouns, I highly recommend The Tongue Untied web site from the School of Journalism at the University of Oregon (http://www.grammaruntied.com/index.html). And let me know how it goes.

Finally, the only thing we have to fear is in fact fear *itself*, because *itself* is an **intensive pronoun**. Intensive pronouns and their cousins the **reflexive pronouns** are like toucans in the snow—anyone can find them. Just label them the selfish pronouns; they always end in –self. When used as intensive pronouns, they add emphasis to the noun or another pronoun. I *myself* use them rarely.

Reflexive pronouns have the gnarly power of making someone both the subject and object of the same sentence, as in "Senators voted *themselves* a pay raise." (Talk about selfish…) Of course, there must be a person for the reflexive pronoun to reflect back to, or the usage is incorrect. Take it from *myself*, for example, would be

wrong. I'm sure you trust me and all, but since I don't appear in the sentence, I can't be reflected back to. So just take it from *me*.

CONJUNCTIONS

Conjunction Junction, what's your function?
Hooking up words and phrases and clauses.
Conjunction Junction, how's that function?
I got three favorite cars
That get most of my job done.
Conjunction Junction, what's their function?

All together now:

I got "and", "but", and "or",
They'll get you pretty far.

Readers of a certain age (such as Grammargator) will forever associate this rather pedestrian part of speech with the delightful ditty from Grammar Rock. Somewhat younger folks know the acronym FANBOYS (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so). These seven are the **coordinating conjunctions.** And as the Grammar Rock tune expresses so eloquently, their job is to hook up words and phrases and clauses.

There are lots of punctuation rules about commas and coordinating conjunctions. While they're worth teaching so that students do it correctly when they write, punctuation is not technically grammar, and Grammargator Guides don't focus much on it. It's really more important to know the difference between coordinating and **subordinating** conjunctions.

When coordinating conjunctions (the FANBOYS) connect clauses rather than individual words, they create a **compound sentence**. That is, the two clauses are each independent, with their own subject and verb, and express a complete thought.

Ask for me tomorrow, *and* you shall find me a grave man.
Candy is dandy, *but* liquor is quicker.
Give me liberty, *or* give me death.

In the examples above, each clause could just as well put on a jacket and go out alone. One happens to be going the same way as the other independent clause, *so* the two are splitting the cab fare.

Subordinating conjunctions, such as *because, though, while*, etc., are bullies. They force what comes after them into dependent clauses that cannot tie their own shoes. The result is a **complex sentence**, such as:

Because you're mine, I walk the line.
Yeah, *though* I walk through the shadow of the valley of death, I shall fear no evil.

Knowing the difference between the two types of conjunctions, and hence the two types of sentences, is central to finding the true subject of a sentence. See Chapter 2, Don't Change the Subject, for more.

INTERJECTIONS

Well, that about wraps things up for the parts of speech. *Oh*, wait. There's one more.

A lot of grammar texts treat **interjections** as afterthoughts, when really they're "beforethoughts". Most often, they appear in dialogue and indicate that the speaker is hemming and hawing, or at a loss for words.

"*Gosh*, I'm just soooooooo surprised and overwhelmed by this award!" (Yes! I beat that smug little so-and-so!)
"*Oh*, I see." (So that's how it is, *eh*?)
"*Gee*, you shouldn't have." (Whom can I re-gift this to?)

Stronger emotions are often set apart from the rest of the sentence and marked with an exclamation point.

No! Don't shoot!
Wow! What a shot!

Of course, like any subject, the whole of grammar is more than the sum of the parts of speech. Rather, these basic parts combine in infinite yet known ways to create everything from Shakespearean sonnets to Springsteen songs. So read on.

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CHAPTER 2: DON'T CHANGE THE SUBJECT

Sometimes, life is simple. And sometimes sentences are, too. A simple sentence has one subject and one verb. Find the verb and you can find the subject by asking who or what is "verbing." Look at these examples from Grammargator Guides:

a)*Waves* from the (b)*pudding* were slogging (c)*me* back and forth, back and forth. (Bud, Not Buddy)

At (a)*school*, (b)*bullies* like (c)*Derrick Dunne* used to pick on him. (Holes)

(a)*Something* like a feathered (b)*bomb* blew up and away in a (c)*flurry* of leaves and thunder. (Hatchet)

In the first sentence, our verb is "slogging." Who or what is slogging? The *waves*, so *waves* is our subject. In the second example, the verb is "pick." Who or what used to pick? *Derrick Dunne*. For the third, we ask who or what "blew up and away" to find the subject, *something*.

When two or more nouns are "verbing" in the same independent clause they form a **compound subject**. For example:

Friends and neighbors would go to the home of the Hirsch family, would take them fish and potatoes and bread and herbs for making tea. (Number the Stars)

Who would "go"? *Friends and neighbors*.

Remember that a compound subject is not the same as a **compound sentence**. While both have multiple subjects, in the latter, the subjects live with different verbs in separate independent clauses, as in,

God gave me this big mouth, *so* I think it can be no sin to use it. (Catherine, Called Birdy)

In the first main clause, God (subject) gave (verb); in the second, I (subject) think (verb).

So far, so good. I'm afraid, though, that with **complex sentences**, things start to get, well, a bit more complex. We recall that a complex sentence contains a main, or independent, clause, and one or more subordinate, or dependent, clauses. By definition, a clause must have a subject and a verb (if not, it's a phrase). Okay, here's the complex part—*the subject of a dependent clause can never be the subject of the sentence.* Let's look at some examples and try to find their true subjects.

As soon as (a)*Grayson* started one, (b)*Maniac* would reach into one of the equipment (c)*bags* and pull out a ball or a bat or a catcher's mitt.(Maniac Magee)

As the ghastly (a)*scenes* repeated themselves in my mind, (b)*I* realized that there was no way of denying what the (c)*captain* had done.(The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle)

You will note that both of these sentences begin with a **dependent clause**. In the first sentence, we have *Grayson* (subject) started (verb), and *Maniac* (subject) would reach (verb). But only *Maniac* is "verbing" in the main clause. *Bags* is not a subject at all; it's the object of the preposition "into." The true subject of the sentence must be *Maniac*.

Likewise, in The True Confessions of Doyle sentence, *scenes* (subject) repeated (verb), and *I (*subject) realized (verb). Unfortunately for those *scenes*, they repeated in the wrong place, the dependent clause, and thus cannot be the true subject of the sentence. And guess what? The *captain* is part of a third clause, the relative clause beginning with "that," so he can't be the true subject. Strange as it seems, the main clause of the sentence in question is:

I realized.

Everything else is so much Cool Whip. Who or what realized? *I* did. The true subject is *I*.

Sometimes a clause will pop up in the middle of a sentence, just to keep things interesting. Usually these are relative clauses beginning with who, which, or that. Even if you have not taught and do not plan to teach much about relative clauses, you can help students avoid subject confusion just by telling them to keep an eye out for those three trickster words. Here are some examples.

"When the (a)*Speaker* notified me that (b)*Rosemary* had applied for release, (c)*they* turned on the tape to show me the process." (The Giver)

In this sentence, we again have three subject/verb pairs: *Speaker* notified, *Rosemary* had applied, and *they* turned on. We just discussed why *Speaker* can't be the true subject of the sentence—it's part of a dependent clause, beginning with the adverb "when." *Rosemary* is likewise disqualified because it comes after the word "that." The true subject is *they*. This makes sense if we break down the sentence grammatically:

"When the (a)*Speaker* notified me/ that (b)*Rosemary* had applied for release/, (c)*they* turned on the tape to show me the process." (The Giver)

The only one of the three clauses that can stand alone is the last one, so its subject is the true subject of the sentence. Again, we can check the answer by asking who or what is "verbing." Who or what "turned on?" *They* did.

Let's try another example:

(a)*Everyone* knew that fifty (b)*cents* was the top (c)*price* paid to any day laborer, man, woman, or child, hired to work in the Granger fields. (Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry)

Okay, we can eliminate *price* pretty quickly—it's part of the predicate, so it can't be a subject of anything. *Cents* looks interesting. But no—there's that word (literally) in front of *fifty cents* making it dependent. Could it be that the entirety of the main clause in this sentence is "*Everyone* knew?" Yes! It is! The true subject of the sentence is therefore…*Everyone*!

Well, that was exciting. But wait! There's more! If you act now, you'll also receive our explanation of **phrases**! Here are some more sentences to ponder.

Above the crab apple (a)*tree* the frayed (b)*end* of the (c)*rope* swung gently. (The Bridge to Terabithia)

We can break this one into the following parts:

Above the crab apple (a)*tree*/ the frayed (b)*end*/of the (c)*rope*/ swung gently.

Here the main clause, "The frayed end…swung gently" is preceded and broken up by prepositional phrases (more on those in Chapter 6, Above and Beyond). The first contestant on "Are you the true subject of this sentence?", *tree*, loses because it does not fall within the main clause. Rather, it is the object of the preposition "above." And objects can never be subjects.

Similarly, contestant *rope* is outside the main clause, playing the role of object for the preposition "of." So the winner is *end*. We can test that answer by asking "who or what is swinging?" Logically, the answer could be *rope*, but this is not logic. It's grammar. *Rope* is an object, so it cannot be a subject in this sentence. Give it a copy of the home game and move on.

Round #2:

"In this (a)*box* are (b)*all* the (c)*words* I know," he said. (<u>The Phantom Tollbooth)</u>

Well, this is a pickle, George, this is a pickle. Let's start by rearranging the sentence a bit. It's a little easier to figure out this way:

"All the words I know are in this box," he said.

Now we can break it up like this:

"All/the words/I know/are/in this box," /he said.

Why does it break down like that? Well, as if it isn't hard enough to figure out these funky sentences, sometimes there are invisible words! That's right—some words are implied but just don't bother to show up. The sentence above really says:

"All/**of** the words/**that** I know/are/in this box,"/he said.

The main clause, "All are," is broken up by "of the words" (a prepositional phrase) and "that I know" (a relative clause), and followed by a second prepositional phrase, "in this box." So, using the rules from the first example, which of the three choices in the original sentence is the true subject?

"In this (a)*box* are (b)*all* the (c)*words* I know," he said. (<u>The Phantom Tollbooth)</u>

That's right. The winner in this round is *all*.

With so many pseudo subjects lurking in complex sentences, it would be really unfair for the grammar gods to pull any more fast ones in this area. And yet they do. There are three common tricks students need to watch for when trying to identify the true subject of any sentence.

IT WAS A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT

The first is called the **expletive construction**, and not because we can all think of a few choice ones for whoever came up with it. Expletive constructions begin with "there" or "it," followed by a linking verb, as in "There is a house in New Orleans." And much like the lyrics to "House of the Rising Sun," expletives carry no meaning. They serve mostly to delay the appearance of the true subject, which I guess is in the bathroom and didn't hear its introduction.

Finding the true subject in this type of sentence takes a little rearranging. Let's take a crack at some.

Round #1:

There's a (a)*place* (b)*I* go inside my (c)*head* sometimes. (Freak the Mighty)

Remember, this sentence is trying to distract you with lame card tricks until the true subject is ready to take the stage. Don't take the bait. First of all, get rid of the useless "There is." Now we have:

A place I go inside my head sometimes.

Better, but now you sound like Yoda. Let's move stuff around:

I go a place inside my head sometimes.

Ooh, very close. Remember those invisible words? Well, there's one in the sentence above, and for something trying to be invisible, it's really pretty obvious.
Here's the sentence with everything revealed:

I go/**to** a place/inside my head/sometimes.

The main clause is simply "*I* go." The winning contestant from the original sentence,

There's a (a)*place* (b)*I* go inside my (c)*head* sometimes. (Freak the Mighty)

is *I*. Let's see what happens in Round #2.

(a)*It* was only in the (b)*fairy tales* that (c)*people* were called upon to be so brave, to die for one another.(Number the Stars)

The first step is always to chop off the expletive, so now we have:

Only in the (b)*fairy tales* that (c)*people* were called upon to be so brave, to die for one another.(Number the Stars)

Look, we got rid of a contestant! Now we're just deciding between *fairy tales* and *people*. That is so cool. Unfortunately, what's left is a sentence fragment, so we've got more work to do. Well, *fairy tales* and *people* are both nouns, so they both meet that basic requirement. But wait a muffin…look in front of *fairy tales*. Aha! A preposition (in)! So *fairy tales* is an object, and we know that objects and never be subjects. Then the answer must be…*people*? Yup, that's right. Here's the original sentence again, followed by what it is really saying:

(a)*It* was only in the (b)*fairy tales* that (c)*people* were called upon to be so brave, to die for one another.(Number the Stars)

(c)*People* were only called upon to be so brave, to die for one another, in (b)*fairy tales.*

QUESTIONING AUTHORITY

Another sentence type that causes some confusion in locating subjects is the question. Questions are simpler to figure out than expletives, however. Just make the question a statement and the subject should pop right out. For example:

Question: "Is every (a)*road* five (b)*miles* from Digitopolis?" asked (c)*Milo*. (The Phantom Tollbooth)

Statement: "Every road is five miles from Digitopolis."

Who or what "is"? *Road*. *Road* is the subject.

Likewise, the sentence

How much can (a)*men* bear to keep together the (b)*nation* their (c)*great-grandfathers* had helped to create? (Across Five Aprils)

Becomes…

Men can bear much to keep together the nation their great-grandfathers had helped to create.

Who or what can bear? *Men*. *Men* is the subject.

DON'T JUST STAND THERE—DO SOMETHING!

Some sentences are too lazy to have a subject, as in

"The suspect was arrested near the scene of the crime."

While others are just trying to avoid taking responsibility:

"Mistakes were made."

Both of these sentences are written in the passive voice (and so is this one). In the first, we would ask "who or what arrested?" The police? Batman? The sentence doesn't tell us because it has no subject. In the second, although we all have a pretty good idea who made the mistakes, the sentence doesn't come out and name names.

Sentences with passive verb constructions are discussed more fully in Chapter 3, I Seem To Be a Verb.

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CHAPTER 3: BACK TO THE FUTURE

As humans, we differ from other animals in our ability to communicate with each other about events that happened in the past or will happen at some future time. We do this through language, and specifically, with verbs.

Although students tend to moan and groan a lot about verbs, they (the verbs, not the students) are really much easier than their counterparts in, say, Spanish. English verbs have only four basic **verb forms** to remember; all other **tenses** are indicated with auxiliary (helping) verbs. Here's a handy chart of verb forms:

INFINITIVE	BASE FORM	PAST	PRESENT PARTICIPLE	PAST PARTICIPLE
To talk	talk	talked	talking	have worked
To give	Give	Gave	Giving	Have given

The first example, talk, is a regular verb. That is, the past and past participle forms are made by adding –ed to the base, and the past participle adds "have" to the past form. The second example is irregular, and first-graders just have to memorize it.

With these forms as a foundation, the many varieties of verb tenses express when things are or happen. Here's another handy chart, of tenses:

INFINITIVE	PRESENT	PAST	FUTURE
To have	Have/has	Had	Will have
To be	Is/are	Was/were	Will be

And we could combine these into a single, super handy chart like this:

TENSE	SIMPLE FORMS	PROGRESSIVE FORMS	PERFECT FORMS	PERFECT PROGRESSIVE FORMS
Present	Talks	Am, is, are talking	Have, has talked	Have, has been talking
Past	Talked	Was, were talking	Had talked	Had been talking
Future	Will talk	Will be talking	Will have talked	Will have been talking

The **perfect form** of a verb indicates completed action. **Progressive forms** are used for action that is ongoing, while **perfect progressive forms** tell us the action will be complete at some point.

Let's look at some examples.

"Still, Mr. Lincoln has asked for seventy-five thousand volunteers—from the militia of all the states." (Across Five Aprils)

This is a perfect form of the verb "to ask" because the action is complete; Mr. Lincoln is finished asking. And it's the present perfect because the speaker is relating action that was in the present at the time the speaker is referring to, as shown by the auxiliary verb "has." In the next example,

By then I had drawn close enough so that, accustomed to the dark, my eyes could make out the head more or less distinctly. (The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle)

The action is also complete. The form is perfect, but because the speaker is telling us about an event that was already in the past at the time the speaker is referring to, it is in the past perfect tense, *had* drawn. Look at one more:

I said, "Timothy, the Navy is searching for us." (The Cay)

Here the action is clearly not complete, so a progressive form is used. Furthermore, the Navy is searching right now, so this is the present progressive.

With a little practice, English verb forms and tenses need not overwhelm students. There are a couple of trouble spots to watch out for, though. Like those passive aggressive sentences we touched on before…

IT'S NOT MY FAULT!

Remember those sentences with no subject? They occur when writers use **passive verb** constructions**.** In such sentences, the noun connected with the verb in the main clause is not doing the "verbing"; rather, it is being "verbed" by some other actor, perhaps unnamed. It sounds a bit sinister, or mysterious, and in a way, it is. Most of the time, it is better to cast sentences in the active voice.

For obvious reasons, only **transitive verbs** (those that require an object) can be constructed in the passive voice. In English, we construct passive verbs by adding a form of the verb "to be" to the past participle of the main verb. Here's what your garden variety passive verb looks like in the different forms and tenses:

TENSE	AUXILIARY VERB	PAST PARTICIPLE
Present	Is, are	produced
Present perfect	Has/have been	produced
Present progressive	is/are being	produced
Past	Was, were	produced
Past perfect	Had been	produced
Past progressive	Was/were being	produced
Future	Will be	produced
Future perfect	Will have been	produced

Let's look at some examples of passive verbs:

On further reflection, however, I *was* quite *convinced* that--other than the candle--Barlow had been empty-handed. (The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle)

The sentence does not tell us who did the convincing; rather, the pronoun "I" *was convinced* by an unnamed agent. Referring to the table above, we can see that it is written in the past tense.

He *was hacked* to pieces by invading Vikings, and his head rolled under a thorn bush where it lay calling "Help, help" until his friends could find it and carry it home. (Catherine, Called Birdy)

In this charming sentence, we know who did the hacking (the Vikings), but they are not the subject of the sentence. This, too, is in the passive voice, and in the past tense.

SUPERHERO OR SIDEKICK?

Sometimes it is not immediately clear whether verbs such as is/are, was/were, and has/have/had are being used as auxiliary verbs or **linking verbs**. For example,

With a yelp, the boys were pushing for first place at the door.
(The Bridge to Terabithia)

Here, the form of “to be” (were) is smack up against another verb, so it looks like an auxiliary verb, which it is. On the other hand, in this sentence,
Somehow the plane was still flying.(Hatchet)

The adverb “still” comes between “was” and “flying.” To figure out the role of “was” in this example, we need to decide if “flying” is being used as an adjective to modify plane, or if “was flying” is telling us what the plane was doing. In this case, it’s the latter. But look at this sentence:

By the time they got back to the baseball room, they were nearly frozen.(Maniac Magee)

Again, there’s an adverb between “they” and “frozen.” This time, however, “frozen” is a **predicate adjective** that describes “they.” “Were” is therefore a linking, not an auxiliary, verb.

Technically, “frozen” is a **participle**, but you really don’t have to teach that or any of the other **verbals** for kids to understand the difference between auxiliary and linking verbs. You can open that can of worms when you introduce phrases.

THE BIG IDEA

We teach verbs in their many forms and tenses so that students will use them properly in their own writing. We know that many do not. In particular, students in the middle grades struggle with maintaining a consistent tense throughout a piece of writing, or even within a paragraph. Learning the various verb forms and tenses is the first step to correcting this problem, but students will not automatically make the leap to using them properly. The middle step, analyzing how skilled writers make choices with verbs, is the bridge to better student writing.

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CHAPTER 4: ABOVE AND BEYOND

Prepositions are *at* the foundation of a democratic society. *Without* them, there would be no government *of* the people, *for* the people, and *by* the people. That's because prepositions have the important job of communicating at what time, in what place, or by what means things happen. English had hundreds of these special words, but we tend to use only about 50 on a regular basis. And here they are:

COMMON PREPOSITIONS

PLACE	TIME	MEANS
About, above, across, against, around, at, behind, below, beneath, beside, between, beyond, down, in, inside, into, near, off, on, out, outside, over, through, throughout, to, toward, under, up, upon	After, before, during, since, till, until	By, except, for, from, like, of, with, without

Obviously, some of these do double duty. We might say "He passed a note *through* the open window," or "He passed the test *through* sheer luck." In the first example, *through* indicates place, while in the second it denotes means. What's important is for students to be able to recognize these little guys in a sentence. To that end, there really is no substitute for having students memorize the most common prepositions, just as we require them to memorize the multiplication table.

The only rule to know about prepositions is that *they must take an object*. Otherwise, the very same word becomes an adverb (or occasionally an adjective). One of the words on the preposition list can even be a verb, so look carefully at these two sentences:

There's no money (a)*inside*, but there (b)*is* a plastic ID card, and (c)*on* the plastic ID card is a lady's name. (Freak the Mighty)

"It was (a)*after* the children were born that she began (b)*to* see (c)*that* the family was odd."(Tuck Everlasting)

In the first, two choices (*inside* and *on*) are listed as pronouns in the chart. But only *on* is followed by an object. *On* what? *On* the plastic ID card. *Inside* does not tell us inside what because it has no object. Rather, it is an adverb describing where there is no money.

In the second sentence, we see *to*, which also appears on the preposition list. But in this example, it is followed not by an object but by a verb. Here, *to* is part of the verb phrase "to see," not a preposition. On the other had, *after* is followed by the noun "children," an object, so *after* is being used as a preposition.

And by the way? Prepositions are okay to end sentences with.

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CHAPTER 5: THE GANG OF FOUR

Sentence types are probably the most straightforward aspect of grammar to teach and learn. There are only four kinds, and three of them identify themselves by their punctuation.

1. A **declarative sentence** makes a statement and ends with a period, as in

As Stacey sped from the room, Mama's eyes darted to the shotgun over the bed, and she edged between it and Uncle Hammer. (Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry)

At noontime, Winnie Foster, whose family owned the Treegap wood, lost her patience at last and decided to think about running away. (Tuck Everlasting)

2. An **interrogative sentence** asks a question and ends with a question mark, as in

Would I choose to die rather than be forced to marry?(Catherine, Called Birdy)

I asked, "Timothy, are you still black?"(The Cay)

3. An **exclamatory sentence** expresses strong emotion or emphasis and ends with an exclamation point, as in

Hey Grayson, look—Mike Mulligan's steam shovel had a baby!(Maniac Magee)

It was his no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather!(Holes)

This brings us to the one problem child, the **imperative sentence**. Like declarative sentences, imperative sentences end with a period, but they differ in structure. For one thing, they often begin with a verb. Sometimes they are described as sentences where the subject is understood, but frankly, they are the sentence type my students often *don't* understand. When I try to tell them the subject is understood, they insist it isn't, and…oh, never mind. Let's just say the subject is implied. Here are some examples of imperative sentences:

Do not discuss your training with any other member of the community, including parents and Elders.(The Giver)

"Just follow that line forever," said the Mathemagician, "and when you reach the end, turn left."(The Phantom Tollbooth)

In the first example, we can wait 'til the cows come home for the sentence to tell us who is being instructed not to discuss his or her training. We don't know because the sentence lacks an overt subject. Rather, the subject is implied to be the person being addressed, in this case, Jonas. Likewise, there is no overt subject in the second example, but we know the Mathemagician is speaking to Milo, so Milo is the implied subject.

Keep reading for an explanation of pronouns.

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CHAPTER 6: HE SAID, SHE SAID

We have already seen how **pronouns** stand in for nouns, and that **personal pronouns** stand in for specific people. Perhaps as a vestige of its Latin roots, English pronouns also change form, depending on the **number** and **case** of the nouns they replace. This chart shows all of the possible permutations of personal pronouns:

	Subjective	Objective	Possessive
First person singular	I	Me	My, mine
First person plural	We	Us	Ours
Second person (singular and plural)	You	You	Yours
Third person singular	He, She, It	Him, Her, It	Her, Hers, His, Its
Third person plural	They	Them	Their, Theirs

The noun a pronoun stands in for is called its **antecedent**. Good writers leave no doubt about which word their pronouns refer back to by keeping the two fairly close together. As a general rule, it is best not to let your pronouns outrun their antecedents by more than a sentence or two, or things get fuzzy fast. It can even happen in the same sentence. For example,

Ellen lived with her grandmother until she was 16.

It's pretty clear that *her* refers to the *antecedent* Ellen, but what about *she*? If the writer wants that pronoun to refer back to Ellen, as we hope, then *she* needs to be replaced with Ellen. Otherwise, it is possible (though admittedly strange) to read this sentences as "Ellen lived with her grandmother until the grandmother was 16." By examining sentences built by good writers, we can model proper pronoun use for our students. Look at these examples:

Jenny had gone with her (a)*father* to see about some stock, and (b)*Jethro* was alone in the (c)*cabin* with <u>his</u> mother.(<u>Across Five Aprils</u>)

I jumped up, folded my (a)*blanket* inside my (b)*suitcase*, hid it and started running the six or seven blocks down to the (c)*mission*.(Bud, not Buddy)

In the first sentence, *his* is a third person singular pronoun that by its form could refer to either *father* or *Jethro*. To avoid confusion, the writer has kept the pronoun in the same clause as its true antecedent, *Jethro*.

The second example uses the third person singular pronoun *it*. To be sure the reader knows it is the *suitcase*, not the *blanket*, that's being hidden, the writer has placed the pronoun closer to its true antecedent.

A DEFINITE MAYBE

Although indefinite pronouns such as *anyone*, *some*, *everybody*, and *all* don't refer to particular people or entities, when personal pronouns refer back to them, they must do so in the correct case and number. This can be tricky because many of the conventions are counterintuitive. Everybody, for example, clearly refers to more than one person, yet it takes a singular verb, as in "Everybody is going on the field trip." This means that everybody will need to bring in *his or her* (not *their*) signed permission slip no later than Monday, and good luck with that.

One potential source of confusion regarding indefinite pronouns is when they are used as adjectives. Remember that pronouns are de facto nouns; they do noun jobs, acting as subjects or objects. Don't be fooled by sentences such as this:

"Now, thanks to Peter, we will (a)*each* have (b)*such* a handkerchief, (c)*each* boat captain."(Number the Stars)

Notice the same word appears as a possible answer twice. The first time it appears in the sentence, *each* is being used as the subject of the main clause. Who will have? *Each* will have. The next time the word appears, it's being used as an adjective, modifying the noun "boat." Which boat? *Each* boat. Sometimes, it's like they make these sentences on purpose.

THE PURPOSE DRIVEN TEACHER

So why teach pronouns? With everything else on your plate, why would anyone carve out time for this stuff? Because lack of agreement between pronouns and their antecedents is a huge problem in student writing, as we so often lament. Unless we decide that anything go, we just have to stand firm on pronoun conventions.

CHAPTER 7: I OBJECT!

Say what you will about the materialism of American culture, **objects** are really no big deal here. Many sentences have none at all. We certainly don't make much fuss about them, as happens in languages like Spanish, where nouns change form depending on their location in the sentence. This certainly makes it easier to build English sentences. The downside, of course, is that there are fewer clues as to what job certain words are doing.

We know that objects, like subjects, are nouns. English has three types of objects: the **direct object**, the **indirect object**, and the **object of a preposition**. Remembering that a subject is the doer in a sentence, we can think of a **direct object** as the do-ee. That is, it receives the action of the verb. Let's look at some examples:

"If the Germans came to search our apartment, it would be clear that the Rosens were here."(Number the Stars)

He could kiss my wrist if he thought I was going to let him whip me up without a good fight.(Bud, not Buddy)

In the first sentence, we would ask "who or what is being searched?" Our *apartment*. *Apartment* is the direct object. Similarly, in the second example, "who or what can he kiss?" My *wrist*. *Wrist* is the direct object.

Note that not all sentences have direct objects. Sentences with linking rather than action verbs cannot have them, since there is no verb action to be received. **Intransitive verbs** such as smile and fall cannot have direct objects, either. There is no answer to the question "who or what is being smiled?"

An **indirect object** tells us to/for whom/what the action of the verb is performed. By definition, it is not the same person, place or thing as the direct object. Consider these examples:

"I bet they never gave you the presents I sent you, did they?"(Freak the Mighty)

"But the memories tell us that it has not always been."(The Giver)

In the first sentence, the object receiving the action of the verb is *presents*, the direct object. The person receiving the presents, however, is the indirect object; "the presents I sent **to** *you.* The second example is a bit trickier because the direct object is a clause, not an individual word. Who or what do the memories tell? They tell "that it has not always been." Who do they tell it to? *Us*, so *us* is the indirect object.

Finally, nouns in a prepositional phrase are called **objects of the preposition**. Students usually have little trouble finding these, unless they failed to learn the preposition list in the first place. These sentences show prepositions with their objects:

If it was absolutely safe, they'd try to steal some food and water from the camp kitchen. (Holes)

"Believe me, Winnie Foster," said Jesse, "it would be terrible for you if you drank any of this water."(Tuck Everlasting)

Once we recognize the words "from" and "of" as prepositions, the function of the nouns *kitchen* and *water* is obvious. They are objects *of* those prepositions.

THE END!

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