

Verbs, Part One

What is a verb?

- A verb is a part of speech that conveys action (e.g. *talk, walk, run*) or communicates a state of being (e.g. *be, exist*).
- Verbs change according to person (point-of-view): first (I, we), second (you), or third (he, she, it, one, they) as in “I go,” “you go,” and “he goes.”
- They also change according to number (singular or plural)¹, voice², and mood³.
- You can distinguish verbs by looking at how they behave. Unlike other parts of speech they can
 - be negated (e.g. *Do not run!*).
 - made into a command (e.g. *Read* the following passage.).
 - follow a modal⁴ auxiliary, which gives more information about the main verb that follows it (e.g. *You must eat.*).
 - have endings that change according to tense (e.g. present *realize*, past *realized*).
 - occur with both a present-participle ending (e.g. *realizing*) and a past-participle ending (e.g. *was/had realized*).

Some words can be both verbs and nouns. For example

- The dog *attacks* the boy. (verb)
- The *attacks* were horrible. (noun)

In the first sentence, *attacks* functions as a verb. In the second sentence, we know *attacks* is not a verb because an article or an adjective can go before it. (See the Homegrown Handout on nouns.)

Verbs can also be identified by their form because they have been created from other parts of speech (e.g. *simplify, detract*). Other verbs are recognized by their changing forms, which change according to person and tense (e.g. she *sits*, she *sat*, she *is sitting*).

Without context, the part of speech for a word like *attacks* can be hard to recognize. Two types of frame sentences can help determine whether a word is a verb.

Frame Sentence 1: They must _____ (it).

The parentheses around *it* indicate that a noun or noun substitute (for example, a pronoun or gerund) may be required after the verb.

- Test the frame sentence with each of the following verbs: *construct, decide, sell, shape, show*. Each verb, when used in the frame, forms a grammatical sentence.
- Now try using a noun like *construction* or *sale* or an adjective like *decisive* or *pretty*: **They must construction it; *They must sale it; *They must decisive it; *They must pretty it*. Using a noun or adjective in the frame does not form a grammatical sentence.

¹ singular = *a nurse*, plural = *nurses* (e.g. *A nurse has* primary responsibility for daily patient care. *Nurses have* primary responsibility for daily patient care.)

² active or passive voice. Consider the following sentence: *The man approached me, and I was asked for money*. Now consider this sentence: *The man approached me and asked me for my money*. In the first sentence, the first clause is in the active voice, and the second clause changes to the passive voice. In the second sentence, the verbs stay active in both clauses.

³ mood: the mood of a verb can be indicative (*she ended the discussion*), imperative (*end the discussion*), or subjunctive (*if the discussion were ended*).

⁴ modal auxiliaries: indicate future actions, possibility, necessity, or obligation. There are nine basic modal auxiliaries: *can, could, might, may, wish, ought to, shall, will, should, would* (e.g. *Will you bring me that book?*).

Frame Sentence 2 (Alternative Version): They must _____ good/well.

While some verbs will fit the first frame sentence, others will fit when followed by an adjective as in the above frame.

- Test the frame sentence with each of the following verbs: *be, smell, sound, taste*. Each verb, when used in the frame, forms a grammatical sentence.

Exercise

Next to each word indicate which, if any, of the following rules of thumb for verbs apply:

- can be negated
- can be made into a command
- changes ending according to tense
- has both present-participle and past-participle ending
- fits one or both of the frame sentences

Example

listen: corresponds to **a** (can be negated), **b** (can be made into a command), **c** (changes ending according to tense), **d** (has both present-participle and past-participle ending), **e** (fits one or both of the frame sentences)

1) frighten

2) howl

3) look

4) sigh

5) fish

6) creation

7) open

8) officer

9) beautiful

1) a, b, c, d, e; **2)** a, b, c, d, e; **3)** a, b, c, d, e; **4)** a, b, c, d, e; **5)** a, b, c, d, e; **6)** none—not a verb **7)** a, b, c, d, e; **8)** none—not a verb; **9)** none—not a verb

References:

Klammer, Thomas P., Muriel R. Schulz, and Angela Della Volpe. *Analyzing English Grammar*. 6th ed. San Francisco: Longman, 2010.

Lunsford, Andrea A. *The Everyday Writer*, 4th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009.