Verbs: The Basics

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,” or “he goes.” They also change according to number (singular or plural), voice, and mood. You can distinguish verbs by looking at how they behave. Unlike other parts of speech, verbs can

• be negated (e.g., Do not run!)
• be made into a command (e.g., Read the following passage.)
• follow a modal auxiliary, which precedes the main verb (e.g., You must eat.)
• have endings that change according to tense (e.g., realize, realized, realizing)
• 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. In the first sentence below, attacks functions as a verb. It is the action of the sentence (performed by the subject—the dog). In the second sentence, we know the word attacks is not a verb because an article or an adjective can go before it.

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

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).

Verb Tests

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

Frame Sentence 1

They must _______(it).

The parentheses around it indicate that a noun or a noun substitute, such as a pronoun or gerund, may be required after the verb.
Test the frame sentence with each of the following verbs: *construct, decide, sell, shape,* and *show*. Each verb, when used in the frame, forms a sentence.

Now, try using a noun like *construction* or *sale* or an adjective like *decisive* or *pretty*. Using a noun or an adjective in the frame does not form a sentence.

**Frame Sentence 2**

They must _______ good/well.

Although some verbs will fit the first frame sentence, others will fit when followed by an adjective.

Test the frame sentence with each of the following verbs: *be, smell, sound,* and *taste*. Each of these verbs forms a sentence in the frame.

**Activity**

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

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

1) frighten
2) howl
3) look
4) sigh
5) fish
6) creation
7) open
8) officer
9) beautiful
**Answer Key for Activity**

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**
