Verbs: Transitive and Intransitive

Verbs can be broken into two types: transitive and intransitive.

Transitive Verbs
In Latin, trans means across. Therefore, the subject transfers the action to the object. Most verbs in English are transitive.

- I \(\rightarrow\) took \(\rightarrow\) my car to the shop.
- We \(\rightarrow\) played \(\rightarrow\) basketball yesterday.

In the above examples, the verbs took and played are followed by the direct objects car and basketball, respectively.

Test for Transitive Verbs
If a verb is transitive, you will always be able to ask a question beginning with what or whom. For example, “To what shop did you take your car?” or “With whom did you play basketball?” By asking these questions, you are asking, “Who or what receives the action of the verb?”

Intransitive Verbs
In Latin, intrans means not across. Therefore, intransitive verbs do not take direct objects because there is no action to transfer.

- Pablo’s writing improved.
- We walked carefully.

Neither of the above examples has a direct object.

Test for Intransitive Verbs
You can recognize a sentence with an intransitive verb because it cannot be rewritten into passive voice. (See our handout on the passive voice.) For example, the sentence “Paul departed late last night” cannot be rewritten to say “Late last night was departed Paul.”
Special Cases

Verbs with Multiple Meanings
Some verbs can be either transitive or intransitive because they have multiple meanings. When used in the context of physical movement, run is intransitive.

- I ran every day when I was an athlete.
- I run every morning to stay in shape.

In the context of guiding or overseeing a company or other group of individuals, run is transitive.

- Joe runs his own restaurant.
- Martha ran her business efficiently.

Verbs in Different Contexts
Verbs can also be either transitive or intransitive depending on context. The verb sing is normally intransitive.

- I sing rather poorly.
- She sings quite beautifully.

Sing is only transitive if the sentence answers the question, “What did the subject sing?”

- I sang “Don’t Stop Believin’” rather poorly last night.
- She sang “I Will Always Love You” quite beautifully last week.

Activity
Determine if the italicized verb in each sentence is transitive or intransitive.

1. Ron Burgundy has been gossiping since early this morning.
3. I lived in Las Vegas for a very brief period.
4. I make an excellent shrimp stir-fry.
5. Michael Simon gave an outrageous speech yesterday.
6. Stephen Curry slipped on his way to the basket.
7. The prosecution proved the defendant’s guilt.
8. George Lucas rejected the script under false pretenses.
9. I worked for ten hours yesterday.
10. The GOP nominated a questionable candidate.

**Answer Key for Activity**

1. intransitive
2. transitive
3. intransitive
4. transitive
5. transitive
6. intransitive
7. transitive
8. transitive
9. intransitive
10. transitive