



Syntax

Introduction

Syntax is the way words are arranged in sentences. In other words, syntax is sentence structure. Syntax includes these important elements:

- Sentence parts
- Word order
- Sentence length
- Punctuation

Expert writers understand how our language is put together. They learn about language and experiment with the way we express ideas. It's not some dry study of terms and exercises that do not connect to our lives. Quite the contrary, experimenting with syntax is playing with the foundation of communication.

Let's think for a moment about film directors. They have to learn many things about making good films before turning out a masterpiece. There are considerations about focus, props, lighting, animation, movement, foreground, and background. These things take time to master. If you've ever made a video, you know that it's harder than it looks. It is the same with writing. Writers must know their tools and how to use these tools for the best effect. It takes time and practice.

This is not a grammar course. You can write perfectly constructed and interesting sentences without ever knowing what the *subjunctive mood* is. So when you study syntax, don't get caught up with trying to master the fine points of grammar (unless, of course, you find them interesting, in which case there are many wonderful books on grammar). That said, you do need to understand some basic vocabulary in order to understand syntax.

First, you need to understand basic **sentence vocabulary**: subject, verb, clause, phrase, and fragment. Then, you need to understand how writers use these sentence parts to get the effects they want. Finally, you need to have a basic understanding of some very special punctuation marks, specifically, the semicolon, the colon, the dash, and italics. That's all. With these basic tools, you can improve your understanding of the experts' use of language, and you can improve your own expertise with language.

Subjects and Verbs

Let's start with sentence vocabulary. A sentence, as you know, has a **subject** and **verb** and expresses a complete thought. But it can get a little tricky. You have to have some idea of what a subject and verb are. For our purposes, we will keep it pretty simple.

The subject is the part of a sentence that expresses what the sentence is about. It's the topic of the sentence.

The verb is the part of a sentence that expresses action or connects the subject with the other words in the sentence.

Let's look at a couple of simple sentences as examples:

The lion ran into the wilderness.

First, ask yourself, "What is the sentence about?" The answer, of course, is the lion. That is the subject.

Then ask yourself, "What does the lion do?" or "What is the sentence saying about the lion?" That give you the verb. The verb here is ran. It tells you what the lion does. The rest of the sentence is detail.

The lion is a wild animal.

Lion again answers the question, "What is the sentence about?" It is the subject.

The lion doesn't do anything in this sentence, so you have to ask the other question: "What is the sentence saying about the lion?" This sentence says that the lion is a wild animal. The verb (is) connects the subject and whatever the sentence says about the subject. The verb is the connection part. The rest of the sentence is detail.

Clauses and Phrases

Of course, not all sentences are so simple, and sometimes you have to know a little more vocabulary. In addition to subjects and verbs, you should be familiar with larger parts of sentences: **clauses** and **phrases**. Both clauses and phrases are groups of related words, but they have differences.

A **clause** is a group of related words that has a subject and a verb.

A **phrase** is a group of related words that has no subject or verb.

Let's look again at the first sentence above:

The lion ran into the wilderness.

This is a **clause** because it has a subject and verb and is a group of related words.

This is a **phrase** because it is a group of related words but has no subject or verb

All complete sentences are one or more clauses put together. That's all you need to know.

Sentence Fragments

The last vocabulary term you need to know is **sentence fragment**. A sentence fragment is a group of words that is punctuated like a sentence but is not really a sentence. There may not be a verb, or the words may not express a complete thought. It looks like a sentence but does not meet all of the criteria for being a sentence. Here is an example, building on the earlier sentence:

The lion is a wild animal. Really wild.

This is a sentence fragment. It looks like a sentence because it starts with a capital letter and ends with a period, but it's not. It has no subject or verb, so it can't be a sentence.

You have probably been told never to use sentence fragments in your writing. That's certainly true in very formal writing, but expert writers know how to use sentence fragments and often do.

At its best, a sentence fragment is used for emphasis, to point out the importance of an idea, as in the example above. The fragment *really wild* makes the reader stop and think about just how wild the lions are. Sentence fragments are powerful in writing, but only if you do not overuse them. Be careful about that. It is OK to write a sentence fragment for emphasis, but don't fill your writing with them. Overuse reduces effectiveness. That's a good general rule for syntax.

Word Order

Now that you have some basic vocabulary, let's talk about word order. The normal word order in English is to have the subject first, then the verb and other details. The sentences above are both in the normal order of the English sentence. But word order is a little more complicated than that. Look at how changing word order changes the meaning in these sentences:

- Jim said that he drives *only* a truck. (He drives nothing else.)
- Jim said that *only* he drives a truck. (No one else drives a truck.)
- Jim *only* said that he drives a truck. (He probably doesn't really drive a truck.)
- *Only* Jim said that he drives a truck. (No one else said it.)

Amazing, isn't it? Word order is important in English. We learn about word order the same way we learn to talk: by listening. So we don't grow up saying, "Want I water some." We learn in early childhood that we say, "I want some water." Subjects come first, then verbs, then the details. And description words (like *some*) usually come before the words they describe. No one has to explain these things; we just learn them.

While word order in English is pretty inflexible, there is room to change things around. Expert writers sometimes do this for special effect or for emphasis. Look at these sentences:

Am I ever happy about my report card!
Pizza I want—not soup.

The first sentence reverses the order of the subject and the verb. In other words, the verb (*am*) comes before the subject (*I*). The second sentence puts the detail (*pizza—what I want*) in front of the subject and verb (*I want*). Putting the words of these sentences in an unusual order catches the reader's attention and emphasizes the ideas. You will learn more about using unusual word order in the syntax lessons.

Sentence Length

Sentence length is another important part of syntax study. Sentences come in all shapes and sizes from one word (*Help!*) to very long and complicated sentences. Writers vary sentence length to keep their readers interested and to control what their readers pay attention to. Most modern writers put the main ideas in short sentences and use longer sentences to expand and develop their main ideas. As you work on the syntax lessons, you will come to understand how expert writers use sentence length to help the reader understand the written message.

The goal is, always, for you to become more aware of the writing tools you have at hand and how to use them better.

Punctuation

A word about **punctuation**. (Notice that I used a sentence fragment to start this paragraph. I did this for a reason. Most students think that punctuation is a bunch of silly rules made up by adults to use as torture devices. I want you to think about punctuation differently: punctuation is power in writing! That's why I started this paragraph with a fragment, used to catch your attention and emphasize the importance of punctuation.)

Punctuation helps us understand the written word. In speech, we pause and use expression in our voices and on our faces to help the listener understand us. Writing has to depend on punctuation. Punctuation helps us fine-tune language and say what we really want to say. In this book, we are going to look at the punctuation used most often in shaping voice: semicolon, colon, dash, and italics.

- The **semicolon** joins two or more clauses when there is no connecting word (*and, but, or*). When a semicolon is used, all clauses are equally important, and the reader should pay equal attention to them all.

Example: *He is my best friend; I have known him most of my life.*

- The **colon** tells the reader that something important will follow. It's very important not to confuse the colon and the semicolon. The semicolon shows equal importance, while the colon throws the emphasis onto what comes after it.

Example: *He is my best friend: he helps me through hard times and celebrates good times with me.*

- The **dash** marks a sudden change in thought or sets off a summary. Parentheses can do this, too, but the dash is more informal and conversational.

Example: *John—my best friend—lives right down the street.*

- **Italics** are used to talk about a word as a word (He used the word *really* too many times in that paragraph.) or for emphasis. When we handwrite something, we show italics by underlining.

Example: Of all the people I've *ever* known, John is my best friend.

As you complete the syntax lessons that follow, you will see many examples of powerful punctuation, and you will get better at using punctuation for power yourself.

The best way—indeed the only way—to master syntax is to read, read, read. Read the works of expert writers. You'll find that simply by reading, your writing will improve. As you pay attention to the way great writers use sentence structure and punctuation, experiment with syntax in your own writing. That's the way we learn. It's worth the effort: syntax is a powerful tool for expressing *your* voice.

Syntax

Read and think:

But once I spread my fingers in the dirt and crouch over the Get on Your Mark, the dream goes and I am solid again and am telling myself, Squeaky you must win, you must win, you are the fastest thing in the world, you can even beat your father up Amsterdam if you really try. And then I feel my weight coming back just behind my knees then down to my feet then into the earth and the pistol shot explodes in my blood and I am off and weightless again, flying past the other runners, my arms pumping up and down and the whole world is quiet except for the crunch as I zoom over the gravel in the track.

Toni Cade Bambara, *Raymond's Run* (*Creative Short Stories*)

Talk about it:

1. Look at the first sentence in this passage. The sentence is made up of many short clauses in a row, each clause separated by a comma. Read the sentence aloud several times and think about it. A comma indicates a short pause, a little breath. Why do you think the author wrote the sentence this way instead of dividing it into separate sentences? In other words, how does the sentence structure emphasize the meaning of the sentence?
2. Both of these sentences start with conjunctions (*but*, *and*). What is the purpose of a conjunction? Why do you think the author has chosen to start these sentences with a conjunction?

Now you try it:

Write a sentence describing getting a phone call you are really excited about. Try to capture your excitement through your sentence structure, as Bambara does, using short clauses connected by commas. Begin your sentence with a conjunction (*and*, *but*, *or*).