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The Essential Tools

Building Blocks and Basics

There are nine word classes (also known as parts of speech) in the English language: **nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, interjections** and **articles**, and various subcategories within the nine classes. Rather than throw all nine in the pot at once, these ingredients need to be handled with care and added a little at a time so each individual part of speech can be measured out according to the rules they relate to. It should be stressed, however, that the function of an individual word and the word class it belongs to depends on where it is positioned in a sentence and hence its relationship to other words.

For example, consider the following three sentences and the meaning of the word *work*:

1. *I was late for work.*
2. *I will work hard to grasp the essentials of grammar.*
3. *You will need a work permit to teach in China.*

In the first sentence, *work* functions as a noun (the place, or thing ‘I’ am late for); in the second sentence, *work*

functions as a verb (the action needed to achieve a stated objective); and in the third sentence, *work* functions as an adjunct noun, a noun that modifies or determines another noun (permit) and therefore performs the same role as an adjective.

In general, sentences in English follow a standard subject, verb, object word order. The subject of a sentence is the person, place, thing, or idea that is *doing* or *being* something. The subject of a sentence can usually be found by identifying the verb and determining who or what it relates to. For example, in the first sentence, *was* is the verb (past tense of *to be*), followed by the adverb of time *late* and the object noun *work*, so *I* is the subject. The object of a sentence therefore follows the verb and is the person, place or thing that the action or state is being directed towards. One note of caution, however, is that some sentences do not follow the subject, verb, object order in quite such a straightforward structure. There are several situations where it is common practice for the subject to follow the verb. Question forms are a good example of an inverted word order (verbs in **bold**/subject underlined):

Have *you* my keys?

In this case the order is verb (*have*), subject (*you*) and object noun (*keys*).

Sentences that begin with an adverb (a word that adds to the meaning of a verb, adjective or even another adverb)

or adverbial phrase are other common constructions that follow a different word order, principally to provide emphasis as in Winston Churchill's famous speech:

***'Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed
by so many to so few.'***

The deliberate inversion of the standard word order is used to powerful effect as to rewrite the sentence as 'A debt has never been owed by so many to so few in the field of human conflict' sounds fussy and barely makes any sense (although neither does Churchill's original if you look at it closely).

Inverting word order is also common when used for literary or stylistic effect as in Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' (1854):

'Into the valley of death rode the six hundred.'

In this case the sentence starts with a preposition (*into*) (words that *position* nouns or pronouns in sentences and clauses) followed by the object, the verb and the subject. 'The six hundred rode into the valley of death' adds little tension or excitement; in fact, there isn't much point going on with the story.

The two quotes above are exceptions to standard word order, messed about with for specific purposes of rhetoric and style. In order to keep things simple we need to start with the basics and the most basic unit of language is the sentence.

Rule 1



When is a Sentence Not a Sentence?

The Rule: Sentences must contain a subject and a predicate, express a complete idea, begin with a capital letter and end with appropriate punctuation marks.



The parts of speech are the building blocks used to create grammatical units commonly known as sentences. Think of these word classes in terms of a vast Lego set where the constituent parts can be combined and recombined to create wondrous and great-looking things. However, similar to Lego, not all of the pieces fit comfortably together and need to be attached in the right place and correct sequence in order to achieve their goal. Sentences are often described as containing and expressing a complete idea and this idea can satisfy a variety of different functions. A *declarative* sentence contains statements and observations, such as 'I am a writer'. An *interrogative* sentence, as the name suggests, asks questions and elicits information such as 'Am I a writer?' (this could also be a rhetorical question,